MASTERS OF THE AIR

MUST-SEE TV SPIELBERG AND HANKS LOOK TO THE SKIES

TOTAL FILM

THE IRON CLAW
Zac Efron has Oscar in his grip

ARGYLLE
Matthew Vaughn's gonzo spy caper

EXCLUSIVE
TEAM TITANS

GODZILLA x KONG
THE NEW EMPIRE

GEORGE CLOONEY & CALLUM TURNER
talk boats, basketball and Brad (Pitt)

+ JENNIFER CONNELLY KUNG FU PANDA 4 WIM WENDERS NICHOLAS HOULT WILLEM DAFOE FURIOSA JAMIE BELL

FUTURE

STILL WAKES THE DEEP
COMING 2024
WISHLIST NOW
STEAM
PS5
GAME PASS
XBOX SERIES X|S
SECRET MODE

Welcome to

TOTAL FILM

THE SMARTER MOVIE MAGAZINE

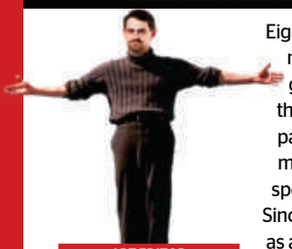
We're coming back after the holiday with a roar. Or a couple of roars. Yep, Godzilla and Kong are back and stomping through 2024 like champs. Let's start as we mean to go on, right? In this issue we're digging into that monster mash as well as the dust-up in the family and the ring in awards-bait must-see *The Iron Claw*. I had the pleasure of chatting with Willem Dafoe about his diverse career, currently capped by the superlative *Poor Things*, and trying to get a word in edgeways with George Clooney and Callum Turner for *The Boys in the Boat* (and checking out Clooney's goofy videos of Brad Pitt on his phone). I also got to talk to the team behind *Masters of the Air* (Callum Turner again!) and nerd out about warplanes. Elsewhere, we nattered with the gang on *Argylle* plus Jennifer Connelly, Jamie Bell and the *Kung Fu Panda 4* creatives.

Honestly, we'd be skipping into the new year if we weren't having to say goodbye to one of the *Total Film* family. Our genius art editor, Mike Brennan, is taking his leave and we're going to have to say goodbye to his illogical spelling, love of a 'Benny and hot', messiah styling and a laugh that is completely infectious. Mike's visionary design has made *Total Film* the beauty it is and we'll miss him. In case we don't see you, Mike – good afternoon, good evening and good night…

Enjoy the issue!

JANE CROWTHER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
@JANEVGCROWTHER

CALL SHEET
THIS ISSUE'S EXTRAS



ART EDITOR
MIKE BRENNAN
@MIKE_BRENNAN01

Eight years, 112 issues and many highlights, but getting to work with the incredibly talented, passionate people that make this magazine so special by far tops them. Since buying my first issue as a teenager, working on *TF* was a dream come true; now I leave to be an avid reader once again.

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
JAMIE GRAHAM
@JAMIE_GRAHAM9

Henry Cavill rocks a mean flat-top in *Argylle*, and I found myself swapping hair tips with him. My MO of 'brush when you remember' wouldn't cut it in Hollywood.

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
NEIL SMITH

I offered my window seat to Tilda Swinton on our flight to the 20th Marrakech International Film Festival and got a chocolate finger in return.

REVIEWS EDITOR
MATTHEW LEYLAND
@TOTALFILM_MATTL

The *Next Goal Wins* screening hit the back of the net with a Paul Merson intro and a salute to Specsavers' 'Best Worst Team', Cwm Albion, who've at last won *something*...

ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT WRITER
EMILY MURRAY
@EMILYVMURRAY

Asked Charles Melton of *May December* how he was feeling about probably getting awards nods for his role. He seemed overwhelmed by the reaction. Fingers crossed he sees some gold come gong time.

DEPUTY EDITOR
MATT MAYTUM
@MATTMAYTUM

Jamie Bell complimented my jacket. 'I've worn something like that in a film before. Don't ask me any more questions about [redacted film] – but it was very similar, and I really liked it.'

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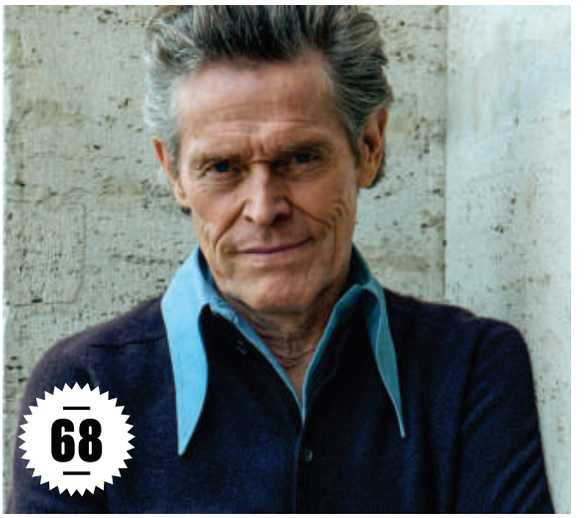

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LITTLE ORPHEUS

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OUT NOW

SECRETMODE

ETERNAL THREADS

A SINGLE-PLAYER, FIRST-PERSON STORY-DRIVEN PUZZLE GAME OF TIME MANIPULATION, CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCE.

OUT NOW

COMING SOON TO

SECRETMODE

DEAR ESTHER

A STUNNINGLY REALISED WORLD, A REMOTE AND DESOLATE ISLAND SOMEWHERE IN THE OUTER HEBRIDES.

OUT NOW

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ZOOL REDIMENSIONED

EXPLORE VIBRANT RETRO LANDSCAPES AND TAKE DOWN MENACING BOSSES IN A MODERN REIMAGINING OF THE CLASSIC PLATFORMING ADVENTURE ZOOL.

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HER MAJESTY'S SPIFFING

JOIN CAPTAIN FRANK LEE ENGLISH AND HIS TRUSTED COLLEAGUE, ALEX, AS THEY TRAVEL THROUGH THE COSMOS IN SEARCH OF PLANETS TO CLAIM FOR A NEW GALACTIC BRITISH EMPIRE!

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LEAD YOUR SPACE AGENCY IN THE SEARCH FOR LIFE IN THIS AUTHENTIC STRATEGY SIMULATION GAME. INVESTIGATE THE SOLAR SYSTEM AND COLLECT EVIDENCE OF LIFE.

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A 3D PET SIMULATION WHERE YOU RAISE YOUR OWN PERSONAL HIVE OF MUTATING DOGS, PHYSICALLY SIMULATED ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THEIR GUTS!

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UNLOCK UPGRADES AND DRIVE YOUR WAY TO ACTION-PACKED GOLF RACING GLORY!

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SNAKE PASS

SLITHER, COIL AND CLIMB YOUR WAY TO THE TOP OF HAVEN TOR IN THIS CUTE 'N' MUDDY PHYSICS BASED PUZZLE PLATFORM ADVENTURE.

OUT NOW

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A LITTLE TO THE LEFT

A COZY PUZZLE GAME THAT HAS YOU SORT, STACK, AND ORGANIZE HOUSEHOLD ITEMS

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STAMPEDE: RACING ROYALE

AVOID ELIMINATION AND FIGHT YOUR WAY TO THE FRONT OF THE HERD IN THE SCRAMBLE TO BE CROWNED CHAMPION!

COMING SOON

SECRETMODE

LODDLENAUT

PICK UP TRASH, EXPLORE THE VIBRANT WATERS, AND TAKE CARE OF AXOLOTL-LIKE ALIEN CREATURES!

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STILL WAKES THE DEEP

NAVIGATE A COLLAPSING OIL RIG TO SAVE YOUR CREW FROM AN OTHERWORLDLY HORROR ON THE EDGE OF ALL LOGIC AND REALITY.

COMING SOON

SECRETMODE

PARCEL CORPS

RIDE ALONG WALLS, GRIND RAILS, AND STARTLE PIGEONS ON YOUR WAY TO CORPORATION-TOPPLING DOMINATION.

COMING SOON

SECRETMODE

MAKE WAY

SPEED AROUND LOOPS, DRIFT AROUND HELTER SKELTERS, AND UNLEASH WACKY WEAPONRY IN THIS MODERN TAKE ON CLASSIC TOP-DOWN MULTIPLAYER RACING GAMES.

OUT NOW

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Developers: The Chinese Room (Little Orpheus, Dear Esther, Still Wakes The Deep), Cosmonaut (Eternal Threads), Sumo Digital Academy (Zool Redimensioned), Sumo Digital (Snake Pass), Billy Goat Entertainment (Her Majesty's Spiffing, Parcel Corps), Auroch Digital (Mars Horizon 2), Animal Uprising (Wobbledogs), Hugecalf (Turbo Golf Racing), Max Inferno (A Little To The Left), Sumo Leamington (Stampede: Racing Royale), Moon Lagoon (Loddlenaut), Ice Beam (Make Way)

EDITED BY
JORDAN FARLEY
@JORDANFARLEY

TEASERS

THE FUR FIST WAY

KUNG FU PANDA 4 | Dragon Warrior Po heads to the big city, and faces a shape-shifting new threat in the kung-fu-fourquel.

1 PANDA EXPRESS

'It's been a while since the last Kung Fu Panda movie,' director Mike Mitchell tells *Teasers* – eight years to be exact. 'And that's because we wanted to make the best sequel of all time.' Now that's fighting talk. The fourth mainline Kung Fu Panda movie has heavyweight competition if it wants to emerge victorious in the battle for best-sequel-evs, not least from *Kung Fu Panda 3*, which brought the story of dumpling-devouring Dragon Warrior Po to a conclusion of sorts in 2016.

'When we made 3, we were like, "Wow, we've really wrapped it up." We patted ourselves on the back,' smiles Mitchell, while talking to *TF* over Zoom from DreamWorks HQ in LA. 'But there was such a hunger to see this character again.'

For anyone in need of a recap, *KFP3* saw Po (Jack Black) graduate to Grand Master, and bestowed with the Staff of Wisdom after unlocking the door to the Spirit Realm. But what comes next? 'Po doesn't want to do anything else. He loves kicking butt and taking names. That's his thing,' notes Mitchell. Instead of embracing the natural next step – taking Oogway's place as the spiritual leader of the Valley of Peace – Po embarks on 'one last battle' before evolving into something new.

'He learns, like we all do, "We're not giving up anything. We're just becoming something more than we already are,"' Mitchell explains. 'It's a great lesson for kids and adults. You can't just [make another movie] because people want it. We really wanted the movie to say something, and to mean something.'

2 FOX FORCE

In his latest quest to kick butt, Po meets travel buddy Zhen (Awkwafina), a Corsac grey fox who eventually becomes a protegé, and potential new Dragon Warrior. Initially, however, they're less yin and yang than chalk and cheese. 'She's a thief and a wanted criminal from the big city,' Mitchell says. 'We figured that she would be very fast and wily and, of course, a fox is a very well-known animal in Chinese culture.'

While Po is typically the joker in the pack, particularly in the company of Shifu (Dustin Hoffman), the free-spirited fighter finds himself on the back foot with Zhen. 'We thought we'd give Po a little bit of frustration. He's never met someone that's such a smart alec and so dismissive of kung fu. So there's still that contrast, but we've flipped it a bit.'

3 TAKING SHAPE

In previous films Po has fought fearsome snow leopards, power-hungry peacocks and spirit warrior yaks, but The Chameleon is something very different. 'He's never faced a female villain,' points out Mitchell. As revealed by the film's recent trailer, The Chameleon will be voiced by Academy Award-winner Viola Davis. 'There's been no villain with such supernatural talent and skills. She's more of a witch… a shapeshifting sorceress with the ability to transform into any animal she's met.'

The Chameleon can even perfectly mimic voices, leaving the door open for the return of major villains from past Kung Fu Panda movies, including Ian McShane's Tai Lung. 'For me, out of all the DreamWorks movies, that's my favourite villain,' Mitchell nods. 'We made sure that we had the perfect reason to bring him back. Ian McShane kind of is Tai Lung. He's very sure of himself.'

4 STREETS OF RAGE

Kung Fu Panda 4 will take Po out of the Valley of Peace and to the more urbanised environs of Juniper City. 'It's a fantasy, Chinese version of Times Square and New York,' Mitchell says. To capitalise on their showstopping new location, Mitchell and his team orchestrated some of the series' most vertiginous fights to date. 'We're not just fighting on the streets, but the rooftops,' the director grins. 'Our production designer, Paul Duncan, built these beautiful rooftops, because we thought, "We're a kung fu movie. Let's have them run over the rooftops, as they often do in movies like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*." We even go underneath the city – we call it the den of thieves. Down in the sewer, there's a whole city of thieves that live there. In this movie, we take advantage of all three of those levels.'

5 KITE CLUB

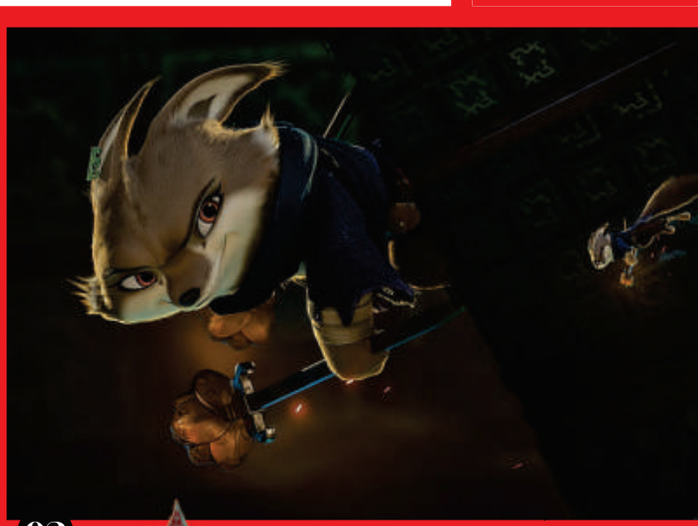
Mitchell highlights two key strengths that are crucial to the series' enduring appeal: Jack Black's endearing performance as Po, and the acrobatic 'kung fu panda action'. When it came to the latter, Mitchell drew on some notable influences for the fourth entry. 'I love Stephen Chow movies,' the director says. 'He's got this great Bugs Bunny energy to all his kung fu moves, and that's what we do, too.' In the eight years since *KFP3* technology has leaped forward, both in terms of animation tools and cameras used to capture live-action kung fu movies. 'We were like: "We're an animated film. We can move the camera anywhere and really play with gravity." That's how we elevated [the action]. We're taking all of the technology that's been created, even for live-action kung fu films, and we're pulling it into animation, which was a lot of fun.'

6 STING IN THE TALE

In a seaside kelp village run by pigs (naturally), Po discovers that the porcine farmers have been tormented by deadly stingrays possessed by demons. 'Po tries to be polite to the stingray, but it turns into a big battle. He's got to save lives,' Mitchell says with a chuckle. 'In past movies we didn't explore aquatic creatures too much. Our challenge for *Kung Fu Panda 4* was: "Let's see those creatures in action."'

Kung Fu Panda 4 will also be the latest beneficiary of the post-Spider-Verse push for more experimental imagery in mainstream American animation. 'We had our cake and ate it,' Mitchell explains. 'This is one of the fuzziest and furriest of DreamWorks movies and, at the same time, we did take a page from Spider-Verse. When a fight happens we have a face-off moment where we do a swipe – almost like an inkbrush paint – in the background. And we really went to town with the spirit realm, and this transforming Chameleon. But all in the film language of an ancient China fantasy animal world, which is already crazy.' **JORDAN FARLEY**

KUNG FU PANDA 4 OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 28 MARCH.



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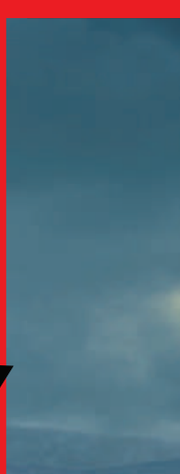

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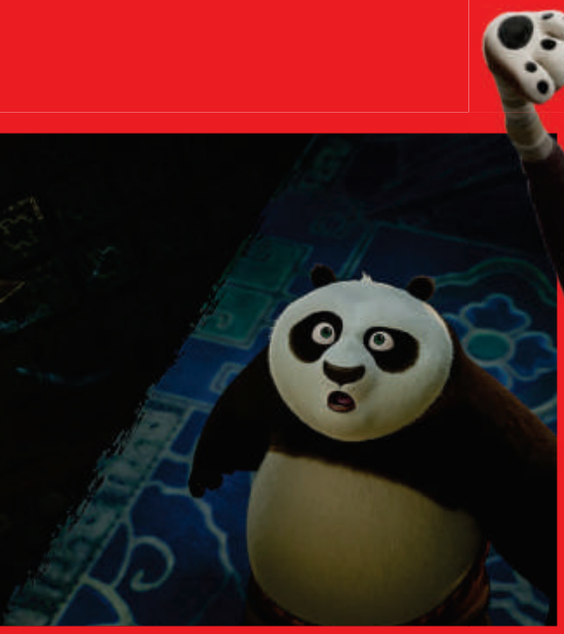

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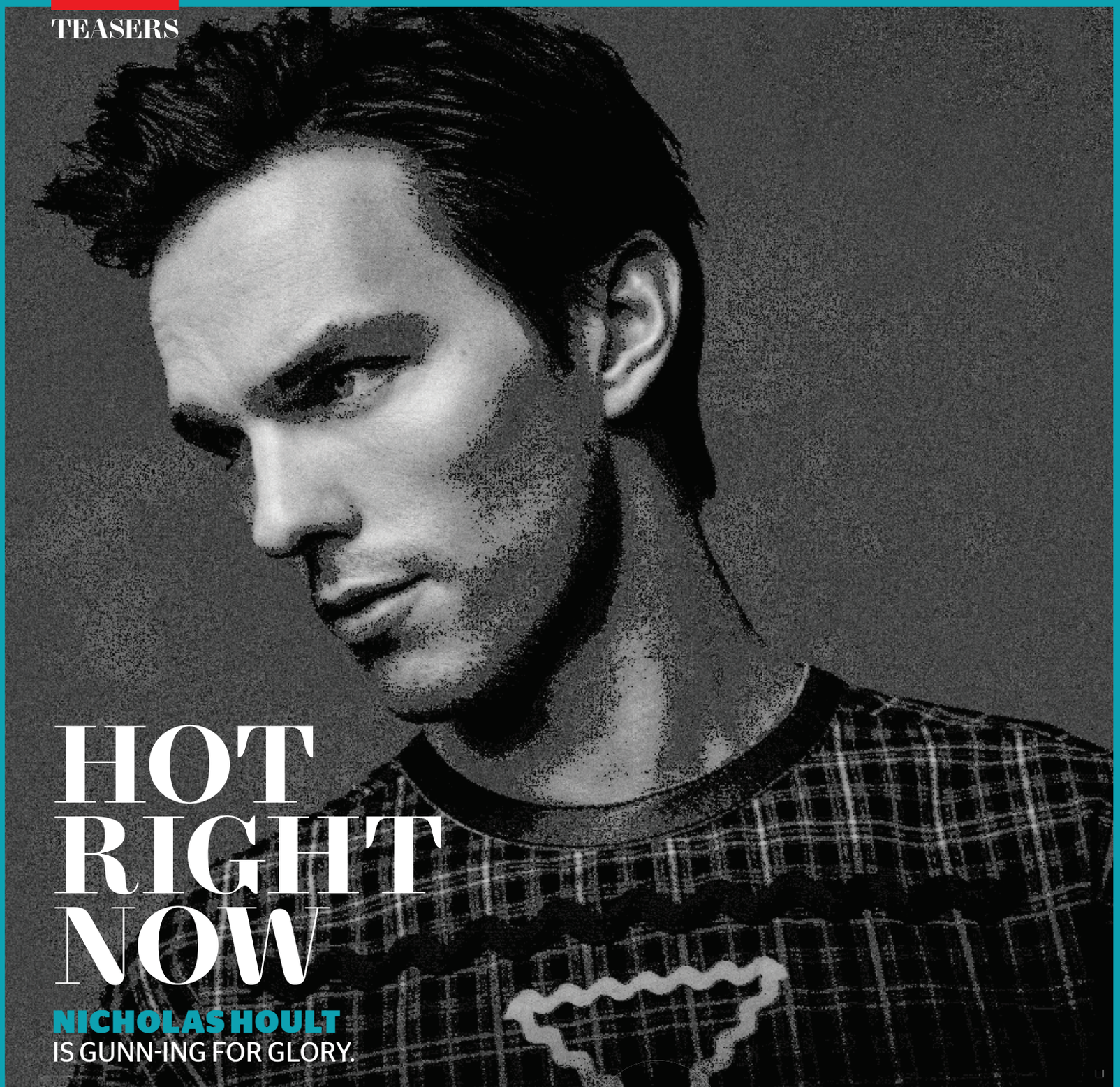

HOT RIGHT NOW

NICHOLAS HOULT IS GUNN-ING FOR GLORY.

I was not really ever a star,' Nicholas Hoult told *The Guardian* in April last year. 'I've never viewed the success I've had as being too much. It was never astronomical, your world flipped upside down, you can't live a normal life.'

Well, that's about to change. Unless you've been living in the Fortress of Solitude, you'll know that the 34-year-old Brit has been cast as Supes' arch nemesis Lex Luthor in James Gunn's *Superman: Legacy*. Just how front and centre the big-bad billionaire will be in this particular film awaits to be seen – as well as Superman (David Corenswet) and Lois (Rachel Brosnahan), we're getting heroes Hawkgirl (Isabela Merced), Green Lantern Guy Gardner (Nathan Fillion), Mister Terrific (Edi Gathegi) and Metamorpho (Anthony Carrigan), plus antagonist the Engineer (María Gabriela de Faría) – but Hoult will likely have a major arc over numerous movies in Gunn's new DC Universe. Also likely is that Hoult will be asked to play it real and grounded, qualities that Gunn praised Michael Rosenbaum for in *Smallville*. Gunn told Rosenbaum, 'You are the best Lex,' while also saying he wasn't too keen on Gene Hackman's 'campy' portrayal.

Raised in Berkshire, Hoult made his first stage appearance aged three, his screen debut at five and had a major breakthrough in *About a Boy*, aged 11. He's since starred in *Skins*, *A Single Man*, *Warm Bodies*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *The Favourite*, *The Menu* and several X-Men movies as Hank McCoy/Beast. But, like he said, he has never gone stratospheric. In the last few years, he missed out on Bruce Wayne to Robert Pattinson in *The Batman*, then an undisclosed role (likely Rooster or Hangman) in *Top Gun: Maverick*, and finally had to walk away from *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One* because of scheduling conflicts with Hulu's *The Great*, in which he amusingly plays Russian emperor Peter III as a sociopathic narcissist.

But Hoult's time is now. As well as *Superman: Legacy*, we'll soon see him as estate agent Thomas Hutter in Robert Eggers' *Nosferatu*, the titular lead in Clint Eastwood's final movie *Juror #2*, and starring alongside Jude Law and Jurnee Smollett in Justin Kurzel's crime thriller *The Order*. Oh, and he's also lending his larynx to *The Garfield Movie*. Yep, his world really is about to flip upside down. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

NOSFERATU OPENS IN CINEMAS IN 2024. JUROR #2 AND THE ORDER ARE TBC. SUPERMAN: LEGACY OPENS ON 11 JULY 2025.

PETER ASH LEE/ART PARTNER LICENSING/TRUNK ARCHIVE

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Resident evil: Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel) at home

EXCLUSIVE

ORDINARY PEOPLE

THE ZONE OF INTEREST Jonathan Glazer's Nazi drama is uniquely horrifying...

The new masterpiece from Jonathan Glazer (*Birth*, *Under the Skin*) is largely set in the home of the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel), and his wife, Hedwig (Sandra Hüller). Living next to the camp, they sip tea and entertain and raise their children as screams and gunshots sound from behind the wall at the end of their manicured garden.

How easy was it to say yes to Jonathan Glazer?

Sandra Hüller: I didn't really want to have anything to do with this period of violence. It's difficult when you're cast in a film from another country and you're the German actress who plays a fascist woman. It's boring. But in this case it felt necessary, and it turned out to be a dream, because of the work, and Jonathan Glazer.

Christian Friedel: I've had two offers before to play Adolf Hitler and I've been offered roles as other Nazis. I've always said no. But Jonathan's decision and his approach was so different. It's great to change the perspective and to give these evil people a human face. That was the challenge. It was two years of my life that I had this character next to me. It was a really dark, intense experience.

'It was a really dark, intense experience'
CHRISTIAN FRIEDEL

The house and garden were rigged with hidden cameras. You could wander and improvise as long as you said a key line or got a point across…

SH: There are many things that work really well with this technical set-up because you're not interrupted. You're alone in the house. We had really long takes. It's a good thing to start playing with each other instead of just opening the door and saying the sentence and closing the door again.

Hedwig Höss (Sandra Hüller) in the family garden next to the camp

CF: Jonathan described it sometimes as *Big Brother* in a Nazi house. We had no technicians on the set, or even Jonathan – he was in a trailer with 10 monitors. But it allowed us to create this reality. For an actor, the most difficult thing is not to be boring. But here it was allowed.

This film feels important *now*. Today, there's so much division and hatred…

SH: It brings people to their own little garden that they have in their life, with a wall next to it. I think it's important to be aware of the excluding language that we use. All the things that we do that feel normal because some American guy started to do it and everyone followed. This is where it starts.

CF: The darkness is inside all of us. This film reminds us to think about ourselves and what could be possible if the political system is changing. Jonathan said to me, 'There are two wolves inside of us: a good wolf and a bad wolf. Which wolf you feed the most will dominate.' It doesn't matter what religion we have, the colour of our skin, our sexuality… It's in all of us. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE ZONE OF INTEREST OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 2 FEBRUARY.

A24

YOU TALKIN' TO ME?

FILM QUOTES POSE AS QUESTIONS. FILM STARS TRY TO COPE.

IN THE CROSSHAIRS THIS MONTH... OLIVER JACKSON-COHEN

You talkin' to me?
This is going to be absolute chaos. I've read these pieces before and how do you even answer these questions? So, you talkin' to me?... [Laughs] How many people have done really shitty impressions [of Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver*]? I'm not even going to attempt it. So... Yes, I am talking to you.

I suppose you think you're brave, don't you?
I'd like to think so. I feel it's a mixture of delusion and insanity to go and do this sort of job, so there's got to be some bravery in there somewhere. It's scary. Some days I think, 'What are you doing?' Anything creative... it's such a weird thing. There's a part of you, somewhere deep inside, that believes you can do this. And then you're met with all of your doubts. Everyone assumes that, as an actor, you love being the centre of attention. But it's a constant battle. You have days when you wake up and think, 'I just don't want to be seen. I want to hide.' Those are tough days. And you also have days where you think, 'This is some of the worst acting ever committed to camera.' It's up and down. But some of the best stuff comes out when you are in that state, because you end up taking risks. Some pay off, some really fucking don't.

Are you gonna bark all day, little doggy, or are you gonna bite?
Er... I'll bite. Why not? When I was younger, I was too afraid to even bark. For so long, I was just grateful that I got to do this as a job, because it's all I ever wanted to do. I felt I wasn't allowed to complain or be frustrated. Then I moved to barking and now I'm biting.

How much can you know about yourself if you've never been in a fight?
I haven't been in a fight since school. Probably pre-teen. I was watching this documentary last night called *The Disappearance of Shere Hite*, and it was all about *The Hite Report*. Shere Hite wrote this book all about female sexuality. It was in the 70s when no one was talking about it. And it brought up all this stuff about masculinity. This survey had been sent out to 3,000 people, and men responded so violently. Watching it, I thought, 'Fucking hell, this whole idea of masculinity – being a *man*, and being violent, or physical – it's so ingrained.' I don't believe you need to be in a fight to know who you are.

Do you have an off switch?
No. I'm desperate to find one. I did a thing a couple of years ago for Netflix, this horror show [*The Haunting of Hill House*], and I played a heroin addict. It was a nine-month shoot and it was rough. That was really hard to switch off [from]. When you're ramping this stuff up, your body doesn't really know what's real and what's not.

Jackson-Cohen plays a former motocross champ and army veteran in *Jackdaw*

What's your favourite scary movie?
That film came out when I was nine or 10. A friend of mine was in America and brought the VHS back. I remember just thinking, 'This is genius.' I rewatched it not long ago and it's such a brilliantly constructed movie. So I'd say *Scream* is my favourite scary movie. For my age group it's seminal. Going back, I'd probably say *The Exorcist*. It's a masterclass.

What are you afraid of?
Everything. This is going to turn into a four-and-a-half-hour interview! This could turn into a therapy session. [Long pause] I don't know how to word it... I'm afraid of... wasting my life.

What would you do if you had less than one minute to live?
It's going to be really sad... I would call my family and I'd thank them for everything they've done. And then I'd send Ellie, my publicist, this emoji [winks and sticks tongue out the side of his mouth]. That would be my final thing.

Is life always this hard or is it just when you're a kid?
It's always this hard! It gets harder. I remember being in primary school and looking out and just staring at a man walking down the street, and going, 'He's free. How amazing that must feel to not have to be here every day, and to just do what you want.' And then you grow up and you're given choice, and choice becomes... the burden [laughs]. It's like, 'Just tell me what to do!' Hence, probably, why I've ended up doing this as a job.

I know you feel like you're going insane sometimes but I'm the only one who can help you. Remember?
What's that? [*Teasers* tells him it's his title character in *The Invisible Man*]. Is it?! I wouldn't trust him for any kind of help. When we were on the press tour, so many people said, 'What did you identify with? Is there a part of you in...' He's sociopathic! What are you talking about! **JAMIE GRAHAM**

JACKDAW OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 26 JANUARY.

SHUTTERSTOCK, VERTIGO

QUESTIONS TAKEN FROM: *TAXI DRIVER*, *THE PRINCESS BRIDE*, *RESERVOIR DOGS*, *FIGHT CLUB*, *DEADPOOL*, *SCREAM*, *CREED*, *SOURCE CODE*, *LEON*, *THE INVISIBLE MAN*

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TRAILER BREAKDOWN

WITNESS THIS

FURIOSA: A MAD MAX SAGA Anya Taylor-Joy takes the wheel for the *Fury Road* prequel.

01

Set 45 years after the collapse (making Max how old?!), *Furiosa* will span 15 years of the future Imperator's life, starting with her abduction from the Green Place of Many Mothers. It's 'a story of grit, survival and impossible hope', according to Anya Taylor-Joy.

02

A very different-looking Chris Hemsworth plays the warlord Dementus, leader of the Biker Horde that picks up Furiosa en route to Immortan Joe's Citadel, where the two tyrants will battle for supremacy. 'He's a violent, insane, brutal person,' says Hemsworth. No surprise there…

03

Not much is known about this character, played by Tom Burke (who replaced Yahya Abdul-Mateen II before filming), though it's possible he's an Imperator. Furiosa is seen wearing a suspiciously similar leather jacket later in the trailer – bad news for Burke's survival chances.

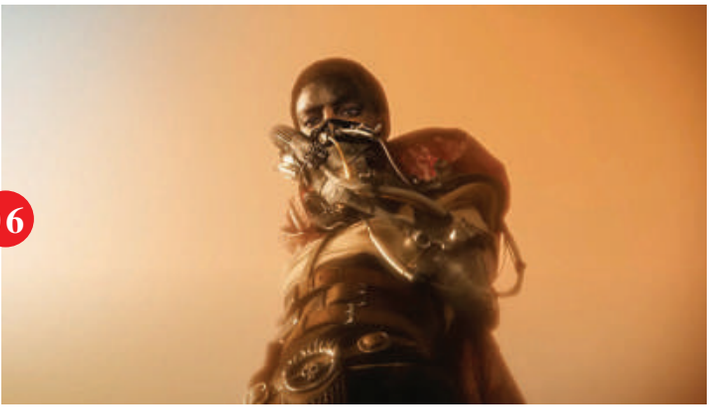
04

After being teased in *Fury Road*, Gas Town and the Bullet Farm will feature in *Furiosa*. In the George Miller-penned comics, Gas Town has a gladiatorial arena dubbed 'Thunderdome Plus' – could Miller be returning to a divisive chapter in Mad Max history?

05

It wouldn't be a Mad Max movie without outrageous vehicles, including Dementus' motorbike-drawn chariot, his enormous monster truck and a suitably shiny chrome tanker. The Fucacima kamakrazee War Boys are back as well, ready to ride eternal for Immortan Joe.

06



Furiosa's mechanical arm is mysteriously absent from the trailer, until the final moments, practically guaranteeing that we'll find out how she loses a limb. In this shot her look is straight out of *Fury Road*, including short, but seemingly not shaved, hair. Mediocre… **JORDAN FARLEY**

WARNER BROS.

FURIOSA: A MAD MAX SAGA OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 24 MAY.

Jeffrey Wright (pictured with Erika Alexander) stars as the disillusioned novelist who suddenly has a hit on his hands

EXCLUSIVE

DO THE WRITE THING

AMERICAN FICTION Stereotypes sell in Cord Jefferson's scathing media industry satire...

Before making *American Fiction*, his adaptation of Percival Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure*, about a writer who finds unwanted success with a grossly clichéd book about Black inner-city violence, Cord Jefferson knew from experience what the establishment wants from Black storytellers. 'Within the past few years I've gotten notes from executives to make a character Blacker,' Jefferson bluntly tells *Teasers*. 'And then when I ask them, "What does it mean to make a character Blacker?" nobody is willing to have that conversation.'

Despite adapting a 22-year-old novel, *American Fiction* feels blisteringly contemporary. Jeffrey Wright stars as Thelonious 'Monk' Ellison, an argumentative intellectual and commercially unsuccessful writer. Frustrated at the success of fellow novelist Sintara Golden (Issa Rae), who seems to share little in common with the deprived Black communities she writes about, Monk pens a grotesquely exaggerated novel as a joke on publishers. But, to his horror, the book becomes a runaway hit.

While Monk has strong, regularly vocalised opinions about what makes good and bad Black art, Jefferson's target isn't storytellers like Sintara so much as a system 'obsessed with trying to replicate what it's done before', like slavery dramas, civil-rights biopics and drug-dealing stories. 'I never wanted the movie to feel like it was finger-wagging or policing Blackness or policing art,' Jefferson says. 'To me, the more valuable question is, "Why are the people at the top of this system only opening their purse strings for this kind of work?"'

As well as a cutting, caustically funny satire, *American Fiction* is equal part family drama, as Monk reconnects with his distant siblings (Sterling K. Brown, Tracee Ellis Ross) following their mother's dementia diagnosis, while striking up a meaningful new relationship with neighbour Coraline (Erika Alexander). Claiming the book 'resonated with me more deeply than any piece of art I'd ever come across', Jefferson similarly has two siblings who cared for their mother after a terminal diagnosis in 2016. 'There were all these overlaps with my life to the point that it started to feel almost serendipitous, like I'm coming across this work at the perfect moment.'

'I never wanted the movie to feel like it was finger-wagging...'
CORD JEFFERSON

Deciding within 50 pages that the film would be his directorial debut, Jefferson started picturing Wright as Monk while still reading the novel. For Wright, Monk is an exceedingly rare leading role in a career full of high-profile supporting performances – a fact that echoes the film's message. 'Jeffrey is the perfect example of Black actors being undervalued and underutilised in the industry,' Jefferson says. 'They're like, "He can forward the plot for the lead white character," but he never really gets the depth of character that other actors do. To me, it was shocking because he's one of the greatest living actors, and everyone agrees on that.'

JORDAN FARLEY

AMERICAN FICTION OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 2 FEBRUARY.

COURTESY OF CURZON

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SOUND BYTES

The month in dialogue and digits.

‘AFTER 45 YEARS OF DOING THIS... I FEEL I’VE PRETTY MUCH SAID WHAT I’VE HAD TO SAY WITH CINEMA.’

NICOLAS CAGE **MAY ‘SWITCH FORMATS’ TO TV AFTER ‘THREE OR FOUR’ MORE FILMS.**

‘We would never want to magically undo it in any way.’

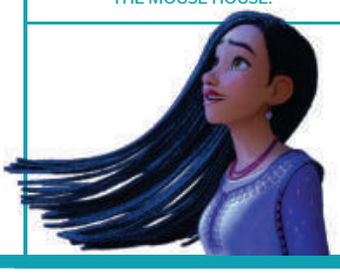
KEVIN FEIGE SAYS TONY STARK WON’T BE BACK IN THE MCU.

1,300

THE NUMBER OF ARTISTS WHO SIGNED A LETTER OF PROTEST AFTER **MELISSA BARRERA** WAS FIRED FROM *SCREAM 7* OVER SOCIAL MEDIA COMMENTS.

$19.5M

THE OPENING WEEKEND BOX-OFFICE TOTAL FOR DISNEY’S **WISH** IN THE STATES, CAPPING A YEAR OF UNDERPERFORMING TITLES FOR THE MOUSE HOUSE.



‘I WANNA KISS RYAN GOSLING IN THE RAIN.’

PAUL MESCAL DREAMS OF STEPPING INTO RACHEL MCADAMS’ SHOES IN *THE NOTEBOOK*.

GETTY

BAD ROMANCE

Todd Solondz is gearing up to make his first film in eight years – *Love Child* – about an 11-year-old inappropriately obsessed with his mother (Elizabeth Olsen).

GOOD THING

BAD THING

DEATH NOTE

Serial-killer comedy *Average Height, Average Build* has been scrapped at Netflix after director Adam McKay left to make a climate-change movie.

‘I’M BUZZING TO BE GETTING BACK ON THE HORSE WITH NICK [LOVE] – HE’S THE ONLY F***ING IDIOT STUPID ENOUGH.’

DANNY DYER AND NICK LOVE ARE FINALLY RE-TEAMING, FOR *MARCHING POWDER*.

‘IF YOU MAKE A THREE-HOUR MOVIE, YOU ARE A SELFISH ACTIVIST, AND NOT OF CINEMA.’

CELINE SCIAMMA **HAS NO TIME FOR FILMMAKERS WHO CAN’T KEEP THEIR RUNTIMES TIGHT.**

Gordon Cormier plays Aang, the current Avatar

EXCLUSIVE

MASTER BLASTER

AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER The animation gets a shot at live-action redemption.

If your only experience of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is 2010's regrettable M. Night Shyamalan movie, reset your expectations for Netflix's imminent live-action series. 'Our goal was to make sure our version was faithful in spirit to the animation,' says new show creator Albert Kim. 'At the same time, we knew we had to appeal to a new generation of viewers who had never seen the original.'

The massive world-building required almost two years of post-production

The feudal fantasy world of *The Last Airbender* is split into four nations represented by different elements: Water, Earth, Air and Fire. Within each nation there are Benders able to manipulate their corresponding element. Only the Avatar can control all four, traditionally serving to keep the peace. *The Last Airbender* picks up a century after the disappearance of the current Avatar, 12-year-old Aang (Gordon Cormier), as the militaristic Fire Nation under Lord Ozai (Daniel Dae Kim) is on the verge of taking over the world.

Featuring a predominantly Asian and indigenous cast, finding actors who could embody fan-favourite characters like waterbender Katara, her goofball brother Sokka, Ozai's disgraced son Zuko, and especially Aang was a battle against the elements. 'You want someone who captures the essence of that character, whether it's the warmth or the childlike wonder or the humour,' Kim says of Aang, a character who's also a pre-teen martial-arts expert. 'But we didn't want some 20-year-old playing a 12-year-old kid!'

In the years since 2010, the Shyamalan film's flimsy bending has been widely ridiculed – something visual-effects supervisor Marion Spates has a plan to avoid. 'Our big goal was: if this was actually to be done in real life, what would it look like?' he says. 'For instance, with firebending, we used blow torches as a reference to get that kind of fidelity and detail.'

Bringing the fantastical world of *Avatar*, with its colossal flying mounts, imaginative locations and epic action to live action was no easy feat, with a near-two-year post-production period overseen by exec producer Jabbar Raisani. 'It's certainly the biggest thing that I've ever worked on,' says the *Stranger Things* and *Lost in Space* vet. 'The complexity and quantity of [VFX] shots that we're dealing with – that's really the challenge.'

'If this was actually to be done in real life, what would it look like?' MARION SPATES

The eight-episode first season is set to cover the animated show's first 20-episode 'book'. It won't be a 1:1 retelling, but Kim assures that the show will stay true to the original series in the ways that matter. 'It's the process literally of going from 2D to 3D. We had to flesh out characters, and fill in gaps, and, in certain instances, go off in new directions,' Kim nods. 'It was a process of dimensionalising the characters, so that was really exciting.' JORDAN FARLEY

AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER STREAMS ON NETFLIX FROM 22 FEBRUARY.

NETFLIX

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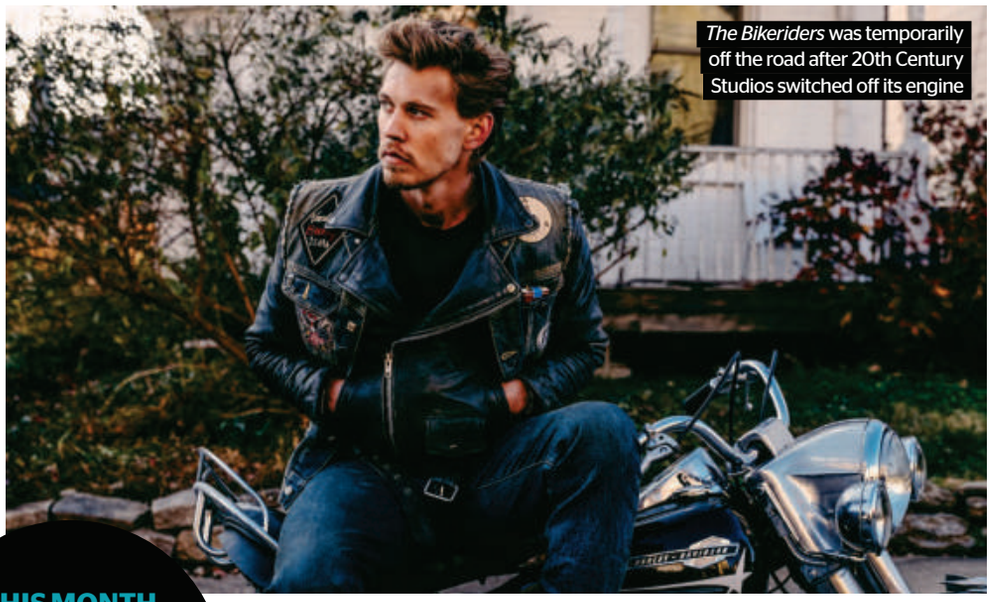
Contributing editor **LEILA LATIF** has something to say...



The Bikeriders was temporarily off the road after 20th Century Studios switched off its engine

THIS MONTH
Why 2024 is the year Hollywood needs to rebuild trust.

THE L WORD

I can feel it in my bones. In 2024, my annual New Year's resolution to spend less time on social media will finally stick. And though moderation is harder than abstinence, I can't bring myself to just delete the accounts and deprive myself of all those unvarnished industry revelations.

Recently, it was shocking to see beloved comedian Kristen Schaal begging her followers to help her burn a DVD of her Disney+ show *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, as she'd discovered it was about to be deleted and wanted 'to show it to my daughter one day'. As 2023 drew to a close, Guillermo del Toro posted an inspiring call to arms about the *Fahrenheit 451*-level responsibility we all have to preserve cinema: 'If you own a great 4K HD, Blu-ray, DVD etc. of a film or films you love, you are the custodian of those films for generations to come.'

Hollywood has had a rough few years amid pandemics, strikes and Samuel L. Jackson not realising we can see what he 'likes' on Twitter, but this year should have been a celebratory return to normalcy. Unfortunately, its creative forces are facing an existential threat. The Paramount+ film library lost more than half its titles over the past year, 2021's *Passing* won Netflix awards but good luck being able to watch it anywhere in 2024, and Disney+'s *Crater* was scrubbed out of existence seven weeks post-premiere. Casts and crews now show up to work, aware their projects could meet the same fate as *Batgirl* and never see the light of day.

It's not just studio executives who told press that they would 'break' the writers and allow things to drag on until striking members began 'losing their houses'. Or Seth Rogen's claims that the powers that be were sacrificing the livelihoods of thousands with 'infighting and divergent priorities'. Or – as highlighted by screenwriter Ed Solomon – the fact that studios can employ creative accounting to make it seem like successful movies lost money, and stymie profit-sharing. It's that cinema's artistry can play second fiddle to tax-break opportunities.

We all understand that companies need profits to survive. But the future of movies should be in the hands of those who love them, and Hollywood was built by risk-takers who pushed cinema's boundaries. Now, it's being rebuilt at the mercy of those who reassure shareholders with how profitable it is to stop making movies.

In 2022, director James Grey warned that to think of filmmaking as 'a very strict balance-sheet equation' is not just creatively stifling but financially short-sighted: 'When you make movies that only make a ton of money and only one kind of movie, you begin to get a large segment of the population out of the habit of going to the movies. The studios should be willing to lose money for a couple of years on art-film divisions and, in the end, they will be happier.' But in 2024, filmmakers at every level face potential jeopardy.

Star-studded crime drama *The Bikeriders* (which graced *Total Film*'s cover) had to be rescued by Focus Features after 20th Century Studios pulled it from release, and blockbuster slates are now a cacophony of 'creative differences', protracted delays, and nixed sequels.

This year is an opportunity to rebuild trust within the industry, with audiences sick of seeing highly anticipated films drop from the release schedule, higher fees for the privilege of streamers shrinking libraries, and TV shows that are cancelled without resolution. So even if filmmakers begin the year unable to trust the higher-ups to be the custodians of their future, they can at least rely on the rest of us to do our part.

Keep going to the movies, keep celebrating original filmmaking, and when spring-cleaning time comes around, whatever you do, keep a hold of those Blu-rays.

LEILA WILL BE BACK NEXT ISSUE. FOR FURTHER MUSINGS AND MISSIVES FOLLOW @LEILA_LATIF ON TWITTER/X.

UNIVERSAL

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Kingsley Ben-Adir plays reggae pioneer Bob Marley

EXCLUSIVE

REGGAE REGGAE SOURCE

BOB MARLEY: ONE LOVE The legendary musician gets the *King Richard* treatment.

Director Reinaldo Marcus Green steered biographical sports drama *King Richard* to six Academy Award nominations, with Will Smith taking home the Best Actor gong. Green is now tackling another biopic – about Bob Marley. Smith might have executed a captivating portrayal of an exceptional real-life figure but he didn't have to shoulder the pressure of playing a bona fide legend.

It's a challenge that falls to British actor Kingsley Ben-Adir (*Barbie*) – tasked not only with capturing Bob Marley's presence and persona convincingly, but also his singing voice and musical talent.

'Man, he put himself through the wringer,' Green tells *Teasers*. 'Losing weight, learning how to play guitar, how to sing, how to dance, dialect… [he put] relentless effort into transforming.' Green wasn't surprised at Ben-Adir's talent and tenacity – the actor had already impressed with an audition tape that, says Green, stood in its own class. His patois was even 'quite good for somebody that doesn't speak patois: it wasn't *Cool Runnings*.'

Critically, the Jamaican artist's family is involved in the production – his widow, Rita (played by Lashana Lynch in the film) and musician children Ziggy and Cedella are producers.

'We had a VIP pass,' explains Green. 'You have archives and tapes that have never been released, and photographs that have never been released, that tell a different side; a story that you can't get from just going on YouTube. Kingsley had access to all of that. He did work that was remarkable and went to places that nobody could go to, myself included.'

Kingley Ben-Adir and Lashana Lynch with director Reinaldo Marcus Green

Ben-Adir had a vocal coach, but Green wanted to find a way to seamlessly blend the actor's voice with real recordings of Marley's vocals. Green turned to some prominent names from recent music-themed biopics, *Elvis* and *Bohemian Rhapsody*: 'I called Austin Butler. I called Rami [Malek]. I said, "How'd you guys do it? What was the secret?" I got some insight. Rami was like, "I sang everything, they just replaced my voice."'

Bob Marley: One Love uses Ben-Adir's voice whenever the film shows Marley composing, and mixes Ben-Adir's tones with Marley's in rehearsal spaces. For live performances, the film leans more heavily into Marley's recordings.

The film focuses on an eventful chapter in Marley's life between 1976 and 1977 that saw him survive an assassination attempt, relocate to England, and receive the cancer diagnosis that would ultimately cut his life tragically short.

'What can you learn about a person in two hours?' asks Green. 'But if we give you enough of an insight to [prompt you to] learn more about him, then we've done our job. I feel like we play a small part in, hopefully, giving the gift that he gave to us.' **KIM TAYLOR-FOSTER**

BOB MARLEY: ONE LOVE OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 14 FEBRUARY.

PARAMOUNT

Benoît Magimel as gourmet chef Dodin, with Juliette Binoche as Eugénie (below)

EXCLUSIVE

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

THE TASTE OF THINGS Trần Anh Hùng slow cooks a passionate love story to perfection...

Something rather tasty for you now. Vietnamese-French director Trần Anh Hùng's latest, *The Taste of Things*, is one of those delicious cinematic morsels that will have you drooling from the very first frame. Based on Marcel Rouff's 1924 novel *La Vie et la Passion ce Dodin-Bouffant, Gourmet*, the film – which won Best Director in Cannes last year – tells the story of cautious romance between a cook, Eugénie (Juliette Binoche), and her gastronomic mentor, Dodin (Benoît Magimel).

'We have a very beautiful female character, because she's in love, but at the same time, she knows how to keep this love,' Hùng tells *Teasers*. 'And I think she's the one who keeps the beauty of this love, because she has this resistance. She says, "No, I don't want to marry." And this was something that is interesting... It means that Dodin, across 20 years, he uses every word he can to convince her. Then the only thing that is left is the cooking.'

Like *Babette's Feast* and the Binoche-starring *Chocolat*, Hùng has crafted a lip-smacking 'foodie' movie, with advice coming from 14-Michelin-starred chef Pierre Gagnaire. While the sensual kitchen scenes are almost dance-like in their choreography, Hùng doesn't suggest he was striving for any form of poetry. 'When everything is well done, then you get the poetry as a gift, but I'm not looking for the poetry. I prefer having another language with my crew. This is my car chase. Like in an action movie!'

One of the big surprises was the fact Hùng was able to cast Binoche opposite her real-life ex-partner, Magimel. 'At first she thought that Benoît will never accept because of their [history],' says Hùng. But then he read the script. 'I go to see him, and he said, "OK, I'm in." And he was so happy. So I thought that it will go well with her – it will not be a problem. And then I tell her, and she said, "Oh really? I'm surprised!" But the first day on the set [seeing them together] I was: "OK, I have my movie!"' JAMES MOTTRAM

THE TASTE OF THINGS OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 16 FEBRUARY.

Q&A

Juliette Binoche

The cooking scenes are splendid, almost dance-like. Did you feel that?
Very much so, with the camera movements and us cooking together. But also it was very much Hùng's precision, that he wanted to feel things in our movement. Being delicate with the way we cook. And he had to teach me sometimes because I was more brutal. He wanted to have this kind of refinement that I don't always think about.

With all the cooking you did, were there any top tips you picked up?
A lot of butter! Which I am not used to because my mother never really cooked with butter. So recently I did more... I added more butter than I usually do. And making an omelette, I learned to use a lot of eggs.

How much do you cook at home?
I do my own cooking, and sometimes when I don't have time to do my own cooking, I ask my assistant to do my cooking. But I love to have my family at home. And every Sunday, I go to [see] my mother and I bring my food to have a gathering. I think it's important. And it's true that you create your own world when you're cooking – that's part of what it is.
JAMES MOTTRAM

GETTY; PICTUREHOUSE ENTERTAINMENT

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Arisa Nakano and Kôji Yakusho enjoy some of Japan's public spaces in *Perfect Days*

EXCLUSIVE

CLEAN LIVING

PERFECT DAYS Wim Wenders finds serenity in life's simple pleasures.

These days, from books to CDs to streaming channels, we're all overloaded with content. 'If you have Netflix, Amazon, Apple and Disney, you cannot even live [long enough] in order to see it all, let alone see one of them properly,' sighs Wim Wenders. 'There's too much!' No wonder the German director of *Paris, Texas* was drawn to creating the character of Hirayama for his new award-winning film *Perfect Days*.

A diligent Tokyo toilet cleaner, Hirayama finds harmony in his monastic existence, snapping photographs of trees and listening to Lou Reed on cassette. 'Hirayama is a certain utopia of a man,' explains Wenders, who admires the character's pared-down life. 'Hirayama was the man I have inside me who has enough of everything and he doesn't need more. He never has the feeling he misses anything.'

Played by Kôji Yakusho, Hirayama certainly chimed with the Cannes Film Festival jury last year, who awarded the Japanese star Best Actor. With *Perfect Days* also now Japan's official entry for this year's Best International Feature category at the Oscars, it's remarkable when you consider it all began life in the pandemic, when Wenders was invited to Japan to make a short piece about the Tokyo Toilet project, a scheme in the Shibuya district that saw 17 architects redesign public conveniences.

'Hirayama was the man I have inside me who has enough of everything and doesn't need more'
WIM WENDERS

The director insisted on a feature instead, 'a film about Tokyo at that moment', inspired in part by Japan's response to the lifting of pandemic restrictions. 'The way that the people of Tokyo came back into social life was so utopian,' says Wenders, noting it was very different in his home of Berlin where public spaces were 'destroyed'. 'The common good was a victim of the pandemic. And in Japan, it was the opposite: the common good was a way to celebrate this social glue.' **JAMES MOTTRAM**

PERFECT DAYS OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 9 FEBRUARY.

SHORT CUTS The latest happenings in movieland...

LOVE LOST

Ryan O'Neal has died at the age of 82. After shooting to fame in 1970 tear-jerker *Love Story*, earning a Best Actor nom in the process, O'Neal went on to star in several classics, including *Barry Lyndon*, *Paper Moon* and *The Driver*.

TIME SPLITTERS

Amid public legal woes for star Jonathan Majors, both director Destin Daniel Cretton and writer Jeff Loveness have departed *Avengers: The Kang Dynasty*. *Loki*'s Michael Waldron has since signed up to write, but the hunt for a director continues.

KIDDING AROUND

The Miyagi-verse continues to expand. OG kid Ralph Macchio and reboot sensei Jackie Chan are teaming up for a new Karate Kid movie, and the hunt is on for a 15-17-year-old Chinese lead. Jonathan Entwistle will direct.

THE HUSTLERS

Following a fleeting collab in *Free Guy*, Ryan Reynolds and Channing Tatum will team up in *Calamity Hustle*, from writer/directors Aaron and Adam Nee. The pair play brothers on the wrong side of an LA crime lord.

GETTY, MUBI

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NEXT BIG THING

MICHAEL ROWE/GETTY

FANTASIA BARRINO IS IN HER PURPLE PATCH

Best known as an award-winning musical artist, Fantasia Barrino hits all the right notes as Celie in director Blitz Bazawule's musical reimagining of *The Color Purple* – a role she was previously celebrated for on stage. On the day she speaks to *Teasers*, her nomination for Best Performance at the Golden Globes has just been announced. 'Excuse my voice, but I've been screaming on the phone with my mom!'

What was your relationship to *The Color Purple*?

I've always been a fan of the original movie. I could relate to Celie and Miss Whoopi Goldberg, who laid the foundation where no one can even try to do what she did. But I had a connection. It meant a lot to me because I had been through some things at a young age.

What convinced you to return to Celie after playing her on stage?

Blitz [Bazawule], our amazing director, he's a visionary. He showed me that he was giving Celie an imagination. And I thought: 'That's the piece that we've been missing.' Because nobody that goes through trauma just sits and wallows in that. They do envision themselves someplace else. I know because I did it. I got to see Celie in a totally different light.

What would award recognition mean?

I don't want to cry because I've been crying all morning! But it would be amazing. I'm representing my daughter, every Black woman, every woman. *The Color Purple* is not just a Black thing; it's a world thing. Every nationality will sit in that theatre and they will relate in some way.

What would you like to do next?

This is my first big movie, and I didn't think that I could do this! So now that I know I can, I want to continue to challenge myself. I want to work with some of the greats – Angela Bassett, Viola Davis, Loretta Devine, Taraji P. Henson... the list goes on. I would love to work alongside these women, and continue to grow as an actress. **JANE CROWTHER/JORDAN FARLEY**

THE COLOR PURPLE OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 26 JANUARY.

EXCLUSIVE

FLIGHT OF FANCY

MIGRATION Love and adventure collide in a quackers new animation...

To launch an entirely original movie in the franchise era is a bold gesture. This is especially true of animation, where takings for Pixar originals in recent years have plunged in comparison to 2019's billion-dollar-busting *Toy Story 4* and 2018's follow-up to *The Incredibles*. The folks at Illumination are no strangers to box office-bothering franchises themselves. The architects behind *Despicable Me*, they also raked in a staggering $1.362 billion with 2023's *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*. It's perhaps no surprise that they're feeling confident now as the studio throws down the feather gauntlet for *Migration*, a wholly original new animated feature about a family of ducks.

A BIGGER POND

"'We want to make a movie about love… with ducks,"' director Benjamin Renner says, quoting Illumination boss Chris Meledandri's *Migration* pitch to him. 'Which I felt was a terrible idea. Then I started understanding what he wanted to do.' Namely, explore how a couple can grow apart as one craves stability and routine while the other seeks new challenges, and how they might overcome this difference. Ultimately, the film is a simple story about a family of ducks – mum Pam (Elizabeth Banks), dad Mack (Kumail Nanjiani), ducklings Dax (Caspar Jennings) and Gwen (Tresi Gazal), and Uncle Dan (Danny DeVito) – venturing out from their small New England pond to head to Jamaica.

UNIVERSAL

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CANNY CANARDS

Why ducks? Renner: 'Mallards are a duck you see everywhere. They illustrate a typical human being very well.' Ducks are unthreatening and relatable; they're a great subject for a story that is essentially a fable. 'Every human on Earth can connect with them because they're animals. They have no colour, they have no culture.' Animating a duck – whose movements are manipulated on a computer as if the animator were a puppeteer – needs three times as many controllers as a human 'rig'. As a result, on *Migration*, a single animator would work on less than the average of two to three seconds of footage per week.

CRISPY SHREDDED LUCK

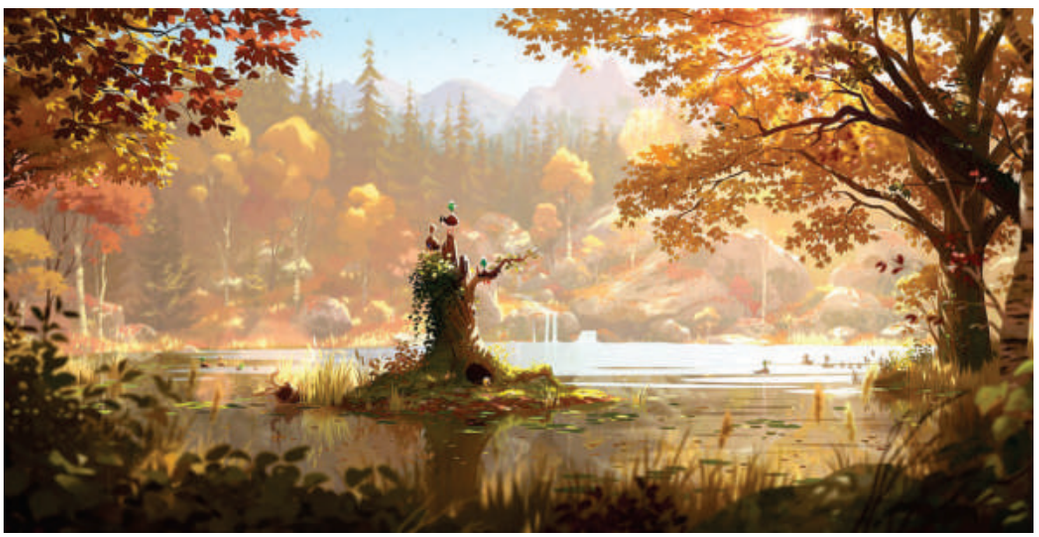
Mike White, the mastermind behind *The White Lotus*, penned the screenplay. 'He came up with the whole story, created the characters, the essence of the movie,' explains Renner. 'And then he had to shoot *The White Lotus* so he left. We did some rewrites… but I was trying to make sure that when we had to change things we kept in his spirit.' Some dialogue was improvised by the cast – when you hire an actor like Danny DeVito, that's par for the course. 'Danny DeVito comes in, reads the first line and just goes for 15 minutes of ad libbing, going completely crazy. You're literally crying with laughter.'

FOWL PLAY

The family's journey brings them to New York. Renner wanted to add an element of surprise to their Big Apple arrival. Clouds shield the city and facilitate a dramatic entrance for the quacking quintet. 'I discovered, working on this movie, it's not like *The Lord of the Rings* where you start by saying there's this little thing you have to destroy or it's the end of the world,' says Renner. 'We have a duck that needs to go on a vacation. And if they fail, they go back home. That's not a big issue.' They had to find inventive ways, therefore, to pull the audience in.

PEAK BEAK

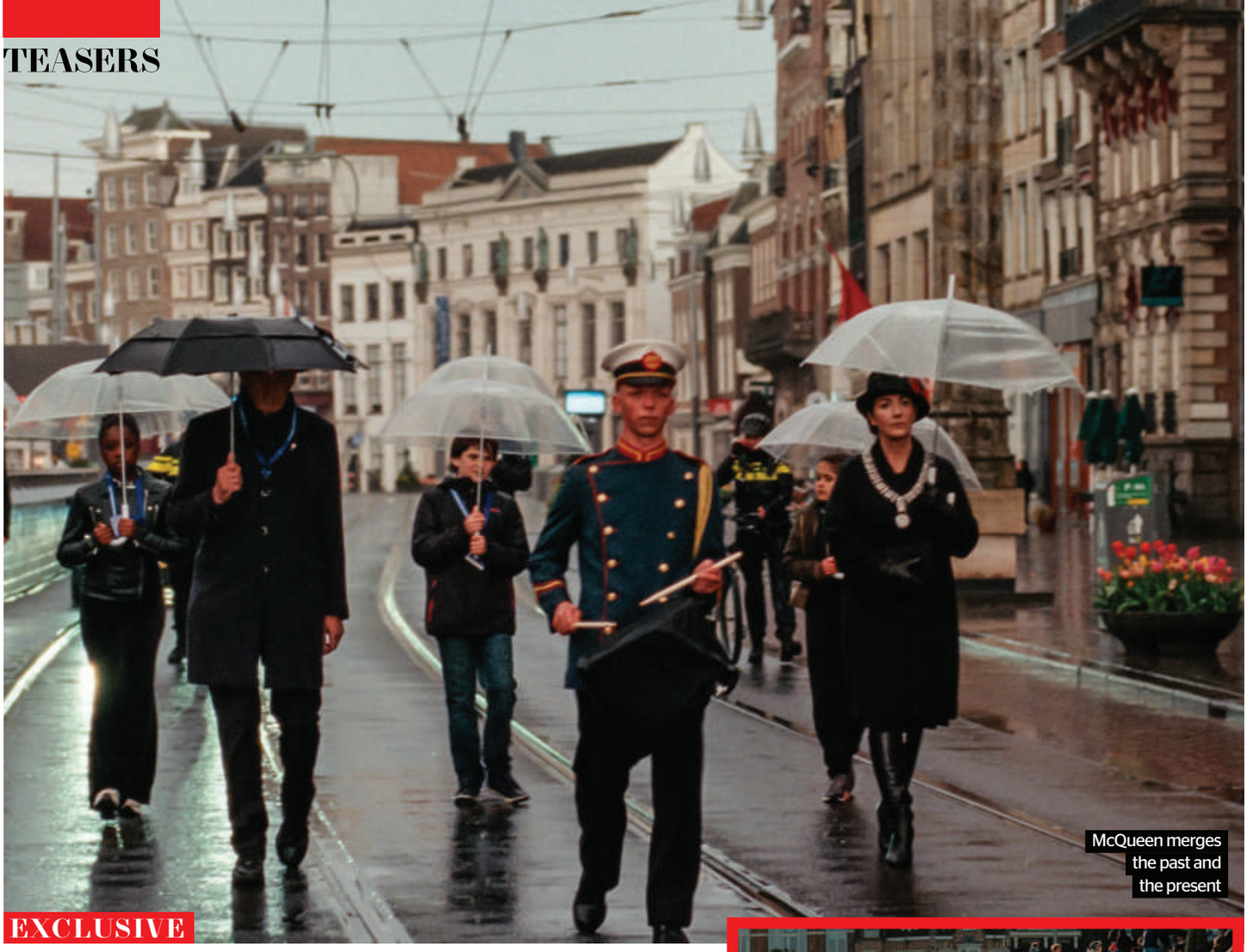
Renner's favourite character is Gwen. 'She was my life-saving character,' says the director. 'Each time the movie was blocking, I just added her. There's a sequence towards the end where Dax is yelling at his father, and we couldn't make the sequence afterwards work. I started improvising Gwen coming in. I showed it to the producer and he loved the relationship and the idea of her. Even when Dax is meeting the girl [love interest], I added Gwen. She became this very funny "young me". I have older siblings and was always following them. I wanted danger but was ready to rat them out for whatever they did.'



NATURE CALLS

Renner cites the horror-influenced heron sequence as one of his favourites in the film – partly because it's based on a real experience he had at an Airbnb and partly because Erin the heron is voiced by Carol Kane. She helped no end in 'making the character weird' and proved difficult to recast for the French dubbing. But, perhaps surprisingly, this wasn't the film's biggest challenge. For the Gallic director, the trickiest aspect was making sure the story 'makes sense from the beginning to the end… until the very end, we were very close to having a film that didn't make sense at all.' **KIM TAYLOR-FOSTER**

MIGRATION OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 2 FEBRUARY.



McQueen merges the past and the present

EXCLUSIVE

GHOST TOWN

OCCUPIED CITY Steve McQueen and Bianca Sitgter's doc examines Amsterdam's Nazi occupation.

Dutch historian Bianca Stigter and British filmmaker Steve McQueen have been married for decades, but *Occupied City* marks their most significant professional collaboration. The documentary is an adaptation of Stigter's book *Atlas of an Occupied City, Amsterdam 1940–1945*, in which she chronicled the Nazi atrocities across the capital.

The documentary is like a huge cinematic frieze

But even at an epic 4hr 22m runtime, the couple tell *Teasers* that plenty of tragic tales and 'banal evil' didn't make the final cut. 'It's not in the film,' Stigter says. 'But during one of the biggest round-ups where Jews were ordered to come out of their houses, there is an account I found of a guy who writes in his diary: "These poor people, it's so sad. But we also picked three pounds of cherries, so I was tired but happy."'

That cheerful disposition when bearing witness to one of the greatest evils committed by humanity is only part of what makes the occupation of Amsterdam so fascinating and disturbing. The city wasn't bombed during WW2 like McQueen's native London, but he explains, 'In the UK that time is seen as a glorious past, but in Amsterdam there's more than a slight hint of shame in having been occupied.'

Even for lifelong Amsterdam resident Stigter, the process of researching the book and making the film shifted her perspective on the city she loved. 'You find out all these stories, and there's this feeling of "Oh my God, why, why?" Every street, you think, "What happened here?" but at the same time, you're living in the present, and you can't drown in the past.'

Much of what the film uncovers is bone-chillingly brutal. For the couple, some stories hit particularly close to home – their children's school was an SS interrogation centre. Still, McQueen emphasises his affection for Amsterdam as 'I don't think it's a haunted city. Far from it, it's a very progressive and joyous place like no other.'

The film also has some moments of joy – McQueen's camera captures the contemporary population that has survived COVID-19 and now gathers in parks and processions to look to the future and better serve their community. But whether depicting human solidarity or depravity, the narration from Melanie Hyams and the film's tone never slip into histrionics. Stigter believes that matter-of-fact approach is 'very much in the same vein as I've written the book; we're not telling you what to feel.' For McQueen, though the film looks both at the terrible past and an unpredictable present, 'there's an optimism in the tone. A certain sense of wonder and emotion in the voice. It's coming from a person and place with a future.'

LEILA LATIF

'I don't think it's a haunted city. Far from it'
STEVE MCQUEEN

OCCUPIED CITY OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 9 FEBRUARY.

MODERN FILMS/A24

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BETWEEN TAKES

JAMIE BELL

ON SEX SCENES, PRANKS AND *BILLY ELLIOT*'S WRAP PARTY...

What's the first thing you do when you get to set?
Music is important for me, with characters. I always have music on in the trailer. Sometimes I'll make these slides of inspiration – art or photography or pictures of people, and references, and things like that. So I'll have that on a loop, on the iPad, playing music and stuff.

Are you a hot-lunch or a cold-lunch person?
I hate eating on set. To eat food is the enemy of, I think, acting. It wants to fuck you up. That's why I like French hours, where it's running lunches. I just don't want people to eat [laughs].

Do you ever sleep on set?
Absolutely not. No way. Here's the thing – especially on [*All of Us Strangers*], and obviously lots of other films I've done with real actors – I look at what they're doing, and they have control over what they're doing. I can't relax. I can't do that thing, because, for me, it has to be torture. I don't know how to do it any other way.

Best and worst on-set experience?
I'd say [*All of Us Strangers*] was very close to a perfect experience. The actors are phenomenal, the crew were fantastic, and everyone had so much of themselves to give to this. I think that always elevates the material, but also the experience.

And anything that just takes too long, I'm completely disinterested in. I was on a movie that just took about a year to make, and we were flying all over the fucking place. We were getting new actors in, and getting rid of other ones. It was just hell. It was just out of control.

Have you ever taken anything from set as a memento?
I have a couple of things from the set of *King Kong* that I did with Peter Jackson. Do you know what my thing is? You know when you go to ceremonies or events or press conferences, and they have little name tags for people? I always nick those off people. I took Andrew's [Scott] and Claire's [Foy] the other day.

'I CAN'T RELAX. FOR ME, IT HAS TO BE TORTURE. I DON'T KNOW HOW TO DO IT ANY OTHER WAY'

Bell plays Andrew Scott's (dead) father in the upcoming *All of Us Strangers*

I have Elton John's and Peter Jackson's and Spielberg's. They just sit on top of my shelf like little trophies [laughs].

How did *All of Us Strangers* compare to the average set?
Well, we were shooting on film for a start. So already there's this kind of preciousness, because when you can hear [makes whirring sound] it changes the energy. There's something precious about 'don't waste the film'.

But then, of course, we're shooting in the director's childhood home. That changes everything about the way you're approaching the work. There's just this massive sense of importance to what you're doing. Those two things made it really elevated from most things that I've ever done before.

Do you ever pull pranks on set? Have you ever been pranked?
I've been pranked before... Channing Tatum. That's all you need to know. I don't need to go any further than that. But Channing Tatum is the king of it.

Most embarrassing moment on set?
Many. Mostly my acting [laughs]. But [sex scenes] are excruciatingly embarrassing. Any time anything like that is going on, it's like, 'What are we doing?'

What's the best wrap party you've been to?
This is going to sound so weird, but the *Billy Elliot* wrap party was amazing [laughs]. All the people that are usually in these massive coats and they're busy running around – they're all now really dressed up. I was like, 'This is so weird, to see people as themselves all of a sudden.' But it was so strange, all these adults being drunk and silly. It was such a great way to finish that job, because it was like, 'Oh, you get to have a big celebration at the end of doing all this shit.' I didn't know what a wrap party was. Nothing's going to be as good as it.

MATT MAYTUM

ALL OF US STRANGERS OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 26 JANUARY.

SEARCHLIGHT

EXCLUSIVE

BLEEDING LOVE

LISAFRANKENSTEIN

A zombie love story powered by pure female rage...

1 IT'S A LOVING TRIBUTE TO THE 80S

Zelda Williams wanted *Lisa Frankenstein* to be an unabashed 'love letter' to the 80s, zombies and romcoms. Scripted by Diablo Cody, the story of a teenage girl, Lisa (Kathryn Newton), falling for a reanimated corpse, Creature (Cole Sprouse), is transformed into a fun, wacky and ghoulish delight in the director's hands. 'I've been lovingly calling it *Edward Scissorhands*, by way of *Death Becomes Her*. I feel like everything these days has to look at the joke and acknowledge it.' But she wasn't interested in being meta. 'I wanted to do the opposite.'

2 A LOOKBOOK WAS KEY

'I have something called aphantasia [the inability to create mental imagery] so I need visual references.' That meant creating a lookbook when Williams was initially approached about the project through an old friend. Crammed inside were references to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* and *An American Werewolf in London*. 'I loved how their special effects weren't horror based, it was more comedy,' she says of John Landis' 1981 hit. 'I wanted to approach that with Creature where you could make something gruesome without it being scary.'

3 COMMUNICATION ISN'T EASY

Creature is unable to speak, which created a challenge for ex-*Riverdale* actor Sprouse. 'I had him take mime classes for a couple months,' the director explains. 'An entirely silent male lead is a really great opportunity for physicality.' Newton, meanwhile, had the tricky task of carrying their scenes together when it came to the dialogue. 'Kathryn reminds me a lot of Madeline Kahn. I had them watch *Young Frankenstein* early on before we started.'

Anger is an energy for Lisa Frankenstein (Kathryn Newton) in Zelda Williams' feature debut

'I had [the cast] watch *Young Frankenstein* early on...'
ZELDA WILLIAMS

4 IT'S ABOUT GRIEVING YOUR OWN WAY...

Lisa is still reeling after her mother's brutal murder and her journey is coming to a place of acceptance as she struggles with her grief. It's an experience that the director connected with personally as the daughter of the late actor Robin Williams, who died in 2014. 'So much of the journey I've been on is the idea that your grief and the way that you express it isn't necessarily going to be palatable for everyone else.' Lisa's grief is 'extremely violent and unpalatable' but she's also 'this really fun, effervescent woman'.

5 ... AND THE POWER OF FEMALE RAGE TO HEAL

Anger is the other emotion that colours Lisa Frankenstein a bloody, bright red. As her relationship with Creature develops, she realises it's OK to release all her pent-up fury. 'It's [about the] acceptance of female rage being an OK reaction.' Lisa's steps towards self-discovery help to heal her trauma. 'In finding her way towards unhinged kookiness, she is more herself and also accepting of love.' **ANN LEE**

LISA FRANKENSTEIN OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 1 MARCH.

UNIVERSAL

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Love thy neighbour: Olivia Colman and Jessie Buckley – more friendly off screen than on

EXCLUSIVE

YOU'VE GOT HATE MAIL

WICKED LITTLE LETTERS Olivia Colman and Jessie Buckley star in a true story of postal abuse...

'It's peculiar, bonkers and brilliantly British'
THEA SHARROCK

There's a really bizarre true story at the heart of *Wicked Little Letters*, the latest feature from theatre-turned-film director Thea Sharrock (*Me Before You*, *The One and Only Ivan*). In 1920s England, in the unassuming seaside town of Littlehampton, one resident starts receiving expletive-laden letters of abuse, creating a scandal that quickly spirals.

The recipient is Edith Swan (Olivia Colman). The suspected sender? Her neighbour, Rose Gooding (Jessie Buckley). Rose vociferously denies it, but it's not long before police officer Gladys Moss (Anjana Vasan) is investigating. *Teasers* catches up with Sharrock just ahead of the film's world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, and she's buzzing at the thought of showing it to a big audience (albeit sad that the actors can't experience it due to the strike in effect at that time). 'The tone of the film is quite hard to pin down,' she says. 'It's a comedy, for sure, but it's a bit of a roller coaster…'

One sure-fire first step to creating a crowd-pleaser is to cast Colman and Buckley, two of the finest actors working today. 'When I came on board, Olivia was already part of the project,' explains Sharrock. 'I know that Jonny [Sweet, screenwriter] had her in mind when he wrote the part, to a degree.' The characters are opposites: Edith buttoned-up, living with her ageing parents (Timothy Spall, Gemma Jones), Rose a sweary, widowed mum who moves to town with her young daughter and new fella.

Director Thea Sharrock on set

'As soon as I knew Jessie was going to be playing [Rose], one of the first things I said to her was, "I think you should make her Irish, so you can just lean into all her roots,"' Sharrock says. 'Which, again, made the two women culturally different.' It also allowed Killarney-born Buckley to 'let go of a layer' and have 'a sense of freedom', says Sharrock.

The leads' experience across an eclectic body of work aided the film's unusual tonal offering. 'I could not believe that it was based on a true story,' says Sharrock, who estimates the finished film is '70 or 80%' factual, story-wise. 'It's completely intriguing and peculiar and bonkers and brilliantly British… But, really, I think it's about friendship and family, above all else, and how and why we behave with each other in the way that we do.'

Sharrock certainly sees resonance with the present day in this 100-year-old story. 'When you transfer everything 100 years later, and you think of social media, and a generational need to find a voice, and to feel that they want to be heard – actually, that's no different [today]. The format's changed. Technology has moved on. But there's still a human need that not everybody has [met].' **MATT MAYTUM**

WICKED LITTLE LETTERS OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 23 FEBRUARY.

STUDIOCANAL

Mads Mikkelsen plays the 18th-century war veteran looking to start a settlement

EXCLUSIVE

HEATH LODGER

THE PROMISED LAND Mads Mikkelsen fights the elements and dark human nature...

When I read the first page of the book and it describes this guy as late 40s and hardened, I was like, "Mads, I have a role for you!"' Re-teaming with Mads Mikkelsen a decade after *A Royal Affair*, Nikolaj Arcel's pioneer epic *The Promised Land* finds the director vividly bringing another piece of 18th-century Danish history to the screen. Although this time, it concerns historical figures most Danes didn't know until recently.

The film adapts Ida Jessen's 2020 novel *The Captain and Ann Barbara*. As Arcel puts it to *TF*, 'This was something that the author dug up from obscurity, creating a fiction around a series of events that actually happened. So, it's not exactly a true story, but it's inspired by the true events.'

In the film version, it's 1755, and the impoverished Captain Ludvig von Kahlen (Mikkelsen) ends 20 years of military service with one goal in mind: conquering the Danish heath in the name of the king, a monarchy pet project that's never succeeded due to the land's apparent barren qualities for growing food. With no family or company beyond runaway servants he enlists, von Kahlen attempts to defeat the elements and odds on the heath, which are made more insurmountable by the merciless interference of a violent landowner (Simon Bennebjerg), who believes the area rightfully belongs to him and not the king. And Ann Barbara (Amanda Collin), the landowner's favourite servant/plaything, happens to be one of the runaways von Kahlen's hiding.

'It's not exactly a true story, but it's inspired by true events'
NIKOLAJ ARCEL

His plans to cultivate the heath face opposition from a cruel landowner

Citing director David Lean and Akira Kurosawa's *Dersu Uzala* as inspirations for the film, Arcel was excited to make an epic 'so character-centric and so intimate in a way, even though it has that big spectacle. Whenever I drag my ass out to a [cinema], it's still because I want the big spectacle.' His last film, Stephen King fantasy adaptation *The Dark Tower*, was an apparently less-than-harmonious attempt to do similar within the Hollywood system.

'The biggest lesson for me from that whole thing,' Arcel says, 'was that talent is a really fragile thing. You do have your talent and nobody can take that from you. But if there are too many powerful voices that can push you in 50 different directions, you can lose sight of what you're doing. I've decided that I would never again do a film where it wasn't my vision.'

That vision extended to favouring story over historical accuracy, though Arcel stresses that Jessen's source novel was itself based on years of thorough research: 'I wasn't that concerned, beyond slang in the language. During emotional scenes, I had to keep saying, "We're in 1755, nobody used the word 'fuck' in these places!"' **JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS**

THE PROMISED LAND IS IN CINEMAS ON 16 FEBRUARY.

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THE HERO

A child actor especially beloved for playing Sarah, the heroine of *Labyrinth*, Jennifer Connelly transitioned to adult roles in movies like *Requiem for a Dream*, *A Beautiful Mind* – for which she won an Oscar – and *Reservation Road*. 'My relationship to the work changed,' she says, as she learned to dig deep. After sailing to box office glory with *Top Gun: Maverick*, she's now playing a traumatised former child actor looking to heal in comedy drama *Bad Behaviour*.

JENNIFER CONNELLY
THE CHILD ACTOR TURNED OSCAR WINNER ON A 40-YEAR CAREER.

Bad Behaviour is set in a New Age enlightenment camp. Have you ever been to one?
I've never been to a retreat like that, no. But she's looking to find peace and happiness, so that's familiar. We can all relate to that.

The film is comedic in places. You normally do dramatic roles. Did you enjoy the switch?
I love that about it. It's a complicated tone: 'Wait, are they serious now, or is it funny?'

In one scene your character, Lucy, has to pretend to be a pooping baby…
Those scenes killed me! So funny and preposterous and desperate and moving, that all these people are so much in pain and want to be healed. They will succumb to this.

Lucy was a child actor. Do you see overlap with your own experience?
I didn't see myself in Lucy – where she is in life and in her relationships. I found her quite alien in the ways she reacts to things. That's what was fun about it.

What are your own memories of being a child actor in films like _Labyrinth_ and _Phenomena_?
I was 13 when we made *Phenomena*. We filmed in Italy and I had done *Once Upon a Time in America*; we filmed part of that in Rome. I was excited to go back. I just had a great time. I learned to speak Italian, I loved Dario [Argento, director]. At that age, I thought that doing a good job was hitting my mark, never complaining, knowing all my lines. I don't think I was a great kid actor. I don't know if I'm a great actor now!

And _Labyrinth_?
Jim Henson was lovely to me, and a genius. The movie was a whole different scale. We had these incredible sets. It was like a wonderland. And I got to be hoisted up on wires. There was so much creativity, and David Bowie… So much to marvel at. It was a magical experience.

At the other end of the scale is _Requiem for a Dream_. Was it gruelling to go to such a dark place?
It was exciting because I had an opportunity to play a part that was so rich. I immersed myself in it. I was testing out a new way of working. But I didn't take it home with me. I couldn't afford to – my first son was very young at the time, so I was compartmentalising and being a mom. Everyone was at the apex of their creativity on that set. It felt very innovative.

You won an Oscar for _A Beautiful Mind_, and met your husband Paul Bettany on it…
An incredible experience, an amazing role. I auditioned for it and was beside myself to get the part. Russell [Crowe] was an extraordinary actor to work with.

How about working with Tom Cruise on _Top Gun: Maverick_?
He's the hardest-working person I've ever met! I thought it was a great idea for Maverick's romance to be with Penny, someone we'd heard of in the original. You hit the ground running because they have this history together.

The relationship is handled with maturity. It takes into accounts the characters' ages, that Penny is a mom…
I loved that. It's great that they made her someone who has her own business, her own pursuits. She literally has her own vessel. She's going to chart her own course. And you want that for Maverick, too. They're kindred spirits. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

(From top) Connelly in *Bad Behaviour*, *Requiem for a Dream* and *Labyrinth*

> 'I THOUGHT THAT DOING A GOOD JOB WAS HITTING MY MARK, NEVER COMPLAINING'

BAD BEHAVIOUR OPENS IN SELECTED CINEMAS ON 5 JAN AND ON DIGITAL FROM 5 FEB.

ICON: ALAMY, SHUTTERSTOCK

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ESS

They've fought each other and they've punched out Mechagodzilla, but now clashing titans King Kong and Godzilla must face the world-ending threat of Skar King, the most malevolent monster we've ever seen. *Total Film* tag teams with director Adam Wingard and stars Rebecca Hall and Dan Stevens to take on *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire*, the gigantic creature feature that sets out to take special effects – and storytelling techniques – to new heights.

WORDS JAMIE GRAHAM

Adam Wingard is buzzing. The director is Zooming from São Paulo, Brazil, where he's attending Comic Con – or CCXP, if you prefer. It's just hours since the first trailer for *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* has dropped, and after months and months of blanket secrecy, there have been revelations of some super-cool shit, to use the technical term. Mini Kong! Badass red-ape titan Skar King! All-new images of Hollow Earth! Godzilla boasting a makeover colour scheme! Kong sporting a freaking bionic arm! And in the trailer's climactic shot, Kong and Godzilla running side by side into battle like some supersized Batman and Robin cloaked in hair and scales.

'Yeah!' grins Wingard, who challenges Kong in the hair stakes with his explosively unruly barnet and bushy, grey-streaked beard cascading down his chest. 'For me, the starting point for this movie was that shot of them running into battle together. That was the very first image that I really had of this movie. That's where you want to end up. It was like, "If we can make something that justifies this moment, then we know we've done it right."'

Judging from the first trailer, and from *Total Film*'s chats with Wingard and his cast and crew, *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* is sure as hell going to justify its superheroic-monsters shot. The story begins just a little down the line from where 2021's *Godzilla vs. Kong* concluded. Should you need reminding, that titanic smackdown of a movie, also directed by Wingard, ended with everyone's two favourite kaiju coming to an uneasy truce. Sure, they'd spent most of the story beating one another to a pulp, but then they'd joined forces to take down Apex's monstrous tech creation, Mechagodzilla. With the hard-earned victory came a grudging respect and an understanding: Kong would toddle off to rule the subterranean Hollow Earth, while Godzilla would glide back into the ocean knowing that the surface world was his dominion. 'Godzilla kind of tells him, "All right, I'll let you go this time. But I don't

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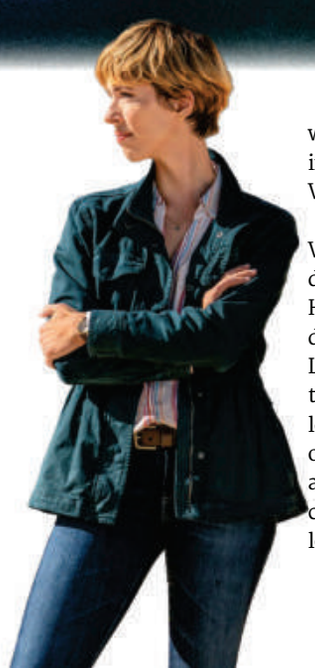
MONKEY BUSINESS

Visual-effects supremo Xavier Matia Bernasconi on creating the most detailed Kong ever...

'Every movie, the quality gets better, and the viewership becomes more refined. An effect 10 years ago that was deemed amazing, now they're, "Meh, it's not that good, is it?"

'In the case of Kong, we spent an enormous amount of time on the eyes, because they're so expressive and we have a lot of close-up shots: the way that the pupils dilate, and we have a little water retention under the eyelid; the way that the muscles move. It's the uncanny valley. You can very quickly become a plastic maquette, you know? Too much detail, too much movement to the facial expression, and suddenly it's not good. And when you don't have enough, it's not good. There's a fine line between being expressive and being fake. We spend an enormous time looking at old films, and taking references from real life.

'Kong is as high as the Statue of Liberty. His face is the entire head and torch of the Statue of Liberty. The iris is the size of three heads of a human. It's mad! Really cool. And there's all this intricacy with the fur. How it moves when he goes into the water, and how it clumps, and how the water flows over it. Or he sits down in the jungle and it's like a building the size of 15 storeys sitting down. The entire forest would tremble. So we have trees falling down, a big pressure wave of dust going past the camera, the camera shaking. It's all the details that make the difference.' ***JG***



want to see you around these parts again, and if I do, there's going to be trouble,"' says Wingard with a tug of his mighty beard.

So what disturbs the peace this time out? Well, Wingard and co. are loathe to go into plot details, but we do know that as Kong explores Hollow Earth to a far greater degree, he discovers that he's not the King after all. Literally sitting on a throne at one point in the trailer, Skar King is bigger than Kong, leaner and more agile, his red fur the colour of blood and fury. And he seems to have an army of titanic primates at his bidding. He clearly rules his dominion by fear – just look at all those skulls littered around the gaff – and he's not about to accept Kong rocking up to Hollow Earth.

So what else do we know? Well, we'll see the return of Monarch's scientist and linguist Dr. Ilene Andrews (Rebecca Hall), her adopted daughter Jia (Kaylee Hottle) and conspiracy theorist Bernie Hayes (Brian Tyree Henry), and they will spend all of their time together, after being split into Camp Kong and Camp Godzilla in the last movie. There are new characters played by Fala Chen, Alex Ferns and Rachel House, and Dan Stevens is along for the adventure in a co-lead capacity, as Trapper.

'Essentially he's a vet,' says Stevens, who's been looking to reteam with Wingard since ➳

they made *The Guest* together. 'Not a military vet – a veterinarian. He's a specialist in these creatures. Their inner workings. If you've got a sick titan, Trap is your guy. He's brought in to give our man Kong a bit of a hand at the beginning of the movie, and then he finds himself along for the ride. He's the sort of guy you want on a mission like this. He's not fazed by much. Some of it is stuff he's seen before, some of it is stuff none of us have ever seen before. He's got this wonderful sense of awe. He's a man of nature. He really feels at one with the cosmos, whether it's above ground or in Hollow Earth.'

OK. Rewind. Is 'giving a bit of a hand' to Kong a teasing reference to that bionic arm glimpsed in the trailer? Wingard tugs at his beard. 'It's kind of hard to say too much more than that without spoiling anything, because he has one of my favourite intros of any character I've ever shot in my films. What I will say is I'd want to play with that [action figure] if I was a kid! And though Apex isn't in this story in a literal way, we kind of hint that Monarch absorbed a lot of the Apex technology after the last film. The glove Kong is wearing, it's somewhat insinuated that's Apex technology.'

'We meet Trapper being extremely up close with Kong,' adds Stevens. 'So for that sequence, they had a giant piece of Kong's…' He laughs. 'I was going to say a giant piece of Kong's anatomy, but that sounds really wrong. They had a real bit of Kong that I had to interact with. That was kind of wild.'

'The human storyline is all in one place this time,' says Hall. 'I really enjoyed getting to work with Brian Tyree Henry on this one, who I didn't get to work with last time. Andrews recruits [his character] to help with something. And working with Dan is a blast for me, one of my favourite things to do. We were at college together.'

Stevens is laughing again. 'We were friends, and then roommates after university, so we go way back. I hope viewers feel that. There's a bit of history there, between our characters.'

Hall nods. 'It's an old friendship, though it's alluded to there was possibly something else, at some point. But now they're having an opportunity to work together.'

Doing what, exactly? *Total Film* is all for protecting key plot points to allow viewers to discover the spectacular surprises for themselves, but we need something. *Anything*.

'It's one big adventure. You'll just have to wait and see,' shrugs Stevens. 'I can't tell you much more,' apologises Hall. Wingard, at least, offers a few crumbs. 'This is very much a kitchen-sink Hollow Earth experience,' he says. 'We take you all over. You see all different types of environments, and lots of new creatures – and some familiar ones. At the same time, we still manage to get around a lot on the surface. We have scenes in Rio and Rome. The film still has this big, international feel. We cover a lot of ground.'

Meet the MonsterVerse's latest (Very) Big Bad – Hollow Earth's Skar King

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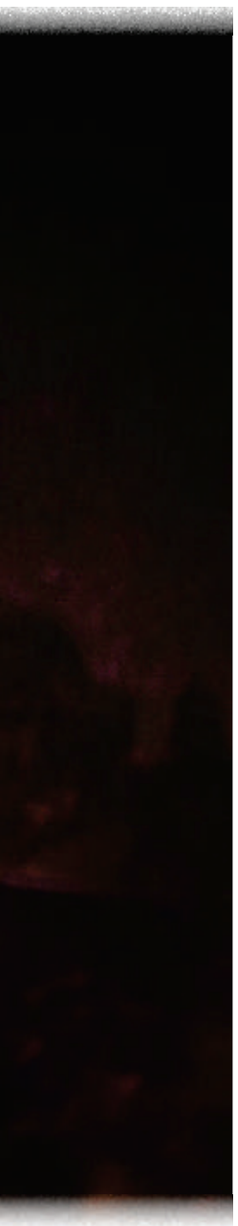
MONSTER SQUAD

Adam Wingard is a horror nut who came to 2021's *Godzilla vs. Kong* off a handful of genre movies – *You're Next*, *The Guest*, *Blair Witch* and *Death Note*, plus segments of anthology films *V/H/S*, *The ABCs of Death* and *V/H/S/2*. When he took the reins of *Godzilla vs. Kong*, he was making the fourth film in the MonsterVerse, a series of films based on creatures created by Japan's Toho Co. Ltd, produced by Legendary Pictures and co-produced and distributed by Warner Bros. It followed on from *Godzilla* (2014), *Kong: Skull Island* (2017) and *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019), and there's since been two TV entries, animated series *Skull Island* and live-action series *Monarch: Legacy of Monsters*, which both debuted in 2023.

Now, you get the sense, Wingard's making not just the fifth MonsterVerse movie and a direct sequel to *Godzilla vs. Kong*, but the monster movie he wants to see, with his own mighty pawprints all over it.



The production team attempted to film on real locations as much as possible

'One of the incredible things about Godzilla is that the character has existed in so many different tones and interpretations in the Toho films,' Wingard explains. 'I'm a huge fan of the whole spectrum, and I've always really enjoyed the late-Shōwa era. There are so many big ideas and they have such epic fun with these larger-than-life characters. In *Godzilla vs Kong*, we paid homage to that epic tradition, including a handful of Easter eggs for the hardcore fans, and while I don't want to give anything away, we definitely work in a few things for the Toho fans in the new film as well, so keep your eyes open!' The flavour of these films rather lend themselves to Wingard's own love of a vivid palette – *The Guest* was soaked in garish hues, and who can forget the climactic scrap of *Godzilla vs. Kong*, as they tusselled amid neon skyscrapers in Hong Kong? Well, now he's doubling down…

'Whenever I was talking to the visual artists, what I told them was, "I want the colour palette of this film to resemble the experience of what it was like to walk down a toy aisle in the 1980s, when you had ThunderCats, G.I. Joe and Transformers." There was just this orgasmic feeling. So many colours and textures. That's what I wanted to bring to this movie. This new, heightened reality. I wanted to find out: can you take that over-the-top

'THEY HAD A REAL BIT OF KONG THAT I HAD TO INTERACT WITH!'
DAN STEVENS

toy-aisle experience, but then find a way to ground that into a reality?'

He grins. 'Very specifically in the last film, I wanted Godzilla to have a continuity, to look the way that he had in *King of the Monsters* and the 2014 *Godzilla*. But then I didn't get a chance at doing my version of Godzilla. So now I wanted to do different things with the spines, and try different colours. I didn't want it to just be random; it's part of the story. And similarly with Kong, I wanted to give him some sort of new look as well. We grew his beard out, and gave him a little bit more grey hair and stuff.'

The environments in *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* will really pop. For Hollow Earth, the production shot in Greenland, Iceland, Hawaii and Australia – breath-snatching landscapes that are juxtaposed to fashion 'a totally weird fantasy landscape', as Wingard puts it. Production designer Tom Hammock and his team ('On *You're Next*, we had five people; here, we had hundreds,' he says) built more than 60 sets for the production, and stresses that real locations were utilised whenever possible.

'Hollow Earth is based on this living fossil jungle that still exists on Earth, in the far north of Australia, where it hits Papua New Guinea,' he says. 'The studio let us go to this place with leeches and snakes and constant rain and

mud, and we built sets that could be carried into the jungle. Literally we shot where the road ends in northern Australia. In the last film we had the HEAV, the Hollow Earth Aerial Vehicle. In this one we updated it so it breaks apart into 14 pieces. We could crane it into a remote riverbed in the middle of the jungle and reassemble it. That way you can have characters exit the spaceship and walk fully around it then enter Hollow Earth. It was not easy!'

'You know it's an interesting day at work when there's a snake handler,' shudders Hall. 'Someone was literally going through the woods to make sure it was clear of any deadly animals. We went to the Daintree Rainforest, which is one of the oldest rainforests on the planet. The leaves were straight out of dinosaur times. They had cassowaries, which are the closest relative to dinosaurs. They're everywhere. They're amazing-looking things – massive emu-like birds with blue heads, and they're very violent during mating season. We were given a warning: "Don't look them in the eye, because they will charge you."'

Stevens takes up the story. 'We were surrounded by cassowaries and crocodiles and pythons. I've never had a safety memo to an entire unit that was a crocodile safety memo…'

'IT'S AN INTERESTING DAY AT WORK WHEN THERE'S A SNAKE HANDLER'

REBECCA HALL

Wingard gives his beard a particularly hard tug, communicating concern. 'It's so scary when you're out in the middle of nowhere, and people tell you these casual stories about: "Oh, yeah, some people went missing. A crocodile took them off, and they never saw them again." You're like, "That happened right over *there*? We're shooting right over here." But that's the fun of it. Until somebody gets hurt, you're all good.'

Spying an opportunity to wrangle some more story info, *Total Film* asks just how much of the movie takes place in cities, to 1) whisk the cast and crew to a safer environment, and 2) because you can't have a Godzilla movie without trashing some tall buildings. Do the aforementioned Rio and Rome get a good stomping?

'Absolutely,' says Wingard. 'You see Godzilla and Kong destroy major landmarks. That's how Godzilla and King Kong pay homage to the greatest places on the planet, you know? You should only be so lucky to have your city destroyed by Godzilla.' He ponders. 'It's still important to be able to do that kind of stuff because Hollow Earth is such an alien world. You still want to bring the kind of believability and scope to these monsters that you can only get whenever you take them to real cities, and juxtapose them against backdrops that we're

Welcome to the jungle: Director Adam Wingard on set with stars Dan Stevens and Rebecca Hall

Kaylee Hottle as Jai, who has formed a special bond with Kong

DEMON SEED

Mini Kong isn't the first monster child to hijack a movie...

LITTLE KONG
Kong's son appeared in *Son of Kong* (1933), released just nine months after *King Kong* wowed cinemagoers. This 12ft offspring had all-white hair and a cheery disposition, and sacrificed himself at the end of the story to save movie producer Carl Denham. 'Laughably bad,' scoffed *The New York Times*.

LUMPAWAROO
Initially created for TV movie *The Star Wars Holiday Special* (1978), 'Lumpy' is the son of Chewbacca and Mallatobuck. He suffered a torrid childhood, enslaved by the Galactic Empire, though he reunited with his famous dad following the liberation of Kashyyyk. He's also in 2020's *The Lego Star Wars Holiday Special*.

COUNTESS MARYA ZALESKA
The title character in Universal's *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), the Countess is also a vampire, though desires to rid herself of the thirst to drink blood. Influenced by Gothic novella *Carmilla* – the film's lesbian subtext was bold for the time – *Dracula's Daughter* in turn influenced Anne Rice's homoerotic vampire fiction.

MINILLA
The adopted son of Godzilla first appeared in *Son of Godzilla* (1967). He looks something like a squashed turd, only friendly. There are other junior Godzillas: nephew Godzooky, second son Godzilla Junior, and Baby Godzilla from Roland Emmerich's 1998 Hollywood movie *Godzilla* (aka Godawful).

MARTIN BRUNDLE
In *The Fly II*, Veronica dies giving birth to Martin Brundle, son of Seth. The child's insect DNA is dormant... Well, apart from the fact that he ages rapidly, into Eric Stoltz. Then he starts fooling around with Dad's telepods, and his inevitable transformation into a gloopy eyesore begins. Pass the sickbag! ***JG***

all familiar with. Seeing the monsters juxtaposed against the Pyramids, for instance, in Egypt, is something I've always wanted to see. We really get to go there on this one.'

Hammock is again keen to stress that reality plays a big part. You thought these MonsterVerse movies were all CGI? Think again. 'We're trying to follow in the footsteps of Bond or Mission: Impossible,' he says. 'On the last movie, for the huge finale [in Hong Kong], it wasn't a computer-generated city until later in the sequence. So if we were going to do a close-up on Godzilla, we went up in a helicopter 500 feet and did the camera move around a point in the city, then put Godzilla in. That commitment continued on this film.'

BEASTS IN SHOW

But now for the main event. Whoever you speak to on *Godzilla x King: The New Empire*, they're in no doubt as to why punters spend good money to go to the cinema to see a kaiju movie. It even extends to the actors. Ask them about the importance of the human storyline, and they'll give you an answer... then check themselves.

'Andrews has had a bit of a promotion within Monarch, so she has a bit more power, but something I love about Andrews is this real-world aspect of mum-ing alongside this incredibly big, powerful job – she's balancing that with an almost-teenage daughter, and all that brings,' starts Hall. Then she adds: 'It's heartfelt but it doesn't take itself too seriously. We understand that the monsters having a big old battle is part of the fun.'

It's a theme that Stevens takes up. 'I do enjoy it when films like this are able to find character in among all these wild epic battles, but I'm under no illusions why people are coming to see these movies,' he says. 'They're about two characters that are many times the size of me.'

It's the reason that there have been 38 Godzilla movies since the atomic lizard first rose from the sea (and the trauma of WW2) to trash Tokyo in 1954, and why King Kong is still monkeying around 91 years and 10 movies after Willis H. O'Brien's stunning stop-motion model scaled the Empire State Building in 1933.

'Godzilla and Kong are these two iconic characters, so you owe it to the audience to give the best performances they've ever given,' says Paul J. Franklin, the visual effects supervisor whose company, Double Negative (Dneg), worked on *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* along with Scanline, Weta, and various other smaller vendors (Franklin says close to 2,000 people contributed to the VFX). Franklin has worked on such films as *The Da Vinci Code*, *First Man*, *Blade Runner 2049* and *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation*, and won Oscars for Christopher Nolan movies *Inception* and *Interstellar*. 'There's a lot of weight riding on it,' he continues. 'We're always trying to go one better, in putting them into the world, making them feel believable, the scale, but also the personality. I call it a creative arms race. We're always in ascent towards the ultimate goal of complete photorealism.'

Xavier Matia Bernasconi, also of Dneg, has a background at DreamWorks in animation, and was brought on by overall visual-effects supervisor Alessandro Ongaro to specifically fine-tune Kong and Godzilla (see interview on page 35). 'Coming from animation,' he says, 'creatures are very cool, very complex. Kong is so human, and he has feelings, and he's not just destroying everything, and he has this relationship with the little girl... Sometimes ➳

Monarch's Dr. Ilene Andrews (Hall) faces a new danger

in visual effects, we focus too much on the technical side. We forget the story. We are at the service of the story.'

And Godzilla? 'When he goes into a city and creates havoc and destruction, you need to sell that. Imagine the size of this foot stomping on the ground. You see a wave of debris rippling through. The nuances of colour. The tongue, the gums. We need to have those details. He's a bit more rigid. Kong is very agile. Godzilla is more like [makes lumbering movement]. We have this big tail that goes around. I mean, my dog creates havoc just with his little tail. Imagine Godzilla! And then you have to ensure that the battles are exciting, dynamic, and really portray the scale.'

Ah, the battles. We can fathom from the trailer that Godzilla gets himself to Hollow Earth, and we can also presume that Skar King makes it to the surface. So what can Wingard tell us about this new fearsome foe? Given he won't say a word about Mini Kong's appearance in the trailer, and whether King Kong will adopt the baby titan and finally have the family he craves, he surely owes us a few insights? After all, previous MonsterVerse movies have rolled out classic Toho monsters like Mothra, Rodan, Mechagodzilla and King Ghidorah, but Skar King is an all-new creation.

'The trailer doesn't tell us about why Skar King is this world-ending threat,' he starts. 'There's a lot of mystery to be uncovered yet. It's interesting, because, in general, these movies are always about the human threat – you know, that human beings are somehow responsible for a lot of the problems. Mechagodzilla is the pinnacle of that – we literally create anti-Godzilla to combat Godzilla, and then that's just too much power for anyone to have. What's interesting about this new film is that we go in a direction that

'I WANTED THIS TO BE MY MIC DROP ON THE STORYTELLING OF MONSTERS'
ADAM WINGARD

Godzilla roars into action when the world is threatened by Skar King

I don't think this series has ever seen before, which is that the Skar King is, in a way, the closest that that human threat has ever been juxtaposed onto a titan itself. The Skar King almost represents an upscaled version of the worst parts of humanity, just as Kong represents some of the best parts of humanity. I would say Skar King is the greatest threat that we've seen in these movies. It's really going to take a full team together to bring it down because it's too big for just one titan!'

Wingard is hyped now, swinging verbal haymakers as wildly as Kong trying to take down the Big G. on the aircraft carrier in the last movie. 'We go bigger on this one,' he promises. 'This movie is high-octane. It's non-stop. I can't believe everything we've packed in. We've got some set-pieces, like…' His eyes saucer. 'But the most important thing – and I can't stress this enough – is that this movie is doing something that no film has ever done before. We are breaking new ground with visual effects in terms of non-verbal storytelling. We have large sequences, almost eight minutes sometimes, where the film just follows the monsters, and the monsters are telling their own story. It really works. It's not like you're sitting there trying to figure out, "OK, what are they thinking? What are they doing?" These monsters are emotive.'

As is Wingard. His passion is palpable. '*That* is the movie I wanted to see when I was a kid. When you're a kid, you barely even understand some of the human subplots. But when the monsters are fighting each other, you understand their alliances. You understand Godzilla and Mothra's relationship. You understand Godzilla and Ghidorah's relationship. Your imagination is interfacing with the movie. So I wanted to truly do a monster movie, and I wanted this to be my mic drop on the storytelling of monsters. Maybe I'll do another one, or maybe not. But if I don't, I wanted to make sure that I put everything in that I ever would want to see on screen.'

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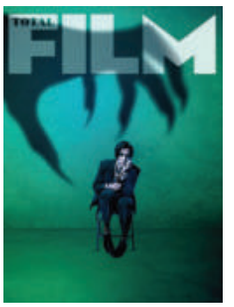

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ON A WING AND

A PRAYER

After tackling the US WW2 effort on land and sea with *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*, Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg turn skywards to explore the experience of the airborne 'Bloody 100th' with another zeitgeist cast. **MASTERS OF THE AIR** exec producer Gary Goetzman and his bomber boys Callum Turner, Anthony Boyle and Nate Mann tell *Total Film* about the training and teamwork that went into saluting real-life aviation heroes and creating must-see TV. At ease, gentlemen...

WORDS JANE CROWTHER

Masters of the Air is the air-force-themed follow-up to *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*

Focusing on the key campaigns of the US air force during WW2 was something exec producer Gary Goetzman and his partners, Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg, 'had always talked about' in the wake of their hit shows *Band of Brothers* (2001) and *The Pacific* (2010) – both multi-strand series that made stars of their casts and set high benchmarks for epic TV. Though we march chronologically further away from the events of WW2 with each passing year, the fascination with the era continues. And the overarching story at the heart of a wartime drama remains eternal. 'It's a very simple concept,' Goetzman tells *Total Film* at the end of a long production that began with filming in the UK in 2021. 'We've got a dictator who wants to rule the world, and a whole bunch of people who want to protect democracy and make sure that he's not successful. It's the kind of story that we love anyway – and it's true. So I think it always fascinates people when they know who they're rooting for, and the goals are defined.'

Based on Donald L. Miller's bestseller, *Masters of the Air: How the Bomber Boys Broke Down the Nazi War Machine*, the limited series tracks the efforts of the Eighth Air Force stationed in Thorpe Abbotts, Norfolk in destroying key European Nazi targets. While the British air force saturation-bombed at night, the American strategy was to fly in daylight in order to target specifically – and the missions were therefore lethal. Flying in B-17 bombers known as 'flying fortresses', the 100th squadron flew directly into flak, fought German aerial attacks, and if a warbird went down, the losses in personnel were catastrophic, with 10 men lost per plane. Lose three planes on a mission and 30 boys didn't return to barracks.

Adapted by John Orloff, *MotA* follows a tapestry of tales across the campaign, taking in the camaraderie, bravery, fear,

Callum Turner and Austin Butler are series leads 'Bucky' Egan and 'Buck' Cleven

Apple

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THE SPOILS OF WAR

What did the team keep from the production?

CALLUM TURNER

'There was an office that they built in the POW camp, the set for that was just extraordinary. And in that room there were two brown, leather armchairs. I'd sneak into that room and I used to go to sleep for five minutes or 10 minutes, just to rest my head. I asked for those, and Gary very kindly gave me those.'

ANTHONY BOYLE

'I steal everything from every set I've ever been on that's not nailed down! I got away with a fucking World War Two jacket. The costume designer let me take it, with a little wink and a nudge. I took the leather one. And a big, massive coat... It's a bit Count Dracula. It looks ridiculous. You can't wear it in any setting, other than being in an aircraft. And [military advisor] Dale Dye also gave us coins at the end of the shoot. They were these World War Two coins that we have all kept that are really special.'

GARY GOETZMAN

'Tom [Hanks] made these challenge coins that military folk use, and keep in their pocket. They're called challenge coins, and we're going to send them very soon to everybody involved with our production. It's a nice keepsake.'

NATE MANN

'I was given a 100th Bomb Crew hat from Dan Rosenthal, Rosie's son, which is a cherished object of mine. It's not from the show necessarily, but he gave it to me, and it's very special to me.'

Barry Keoghan plays pilot Curtis Biddick

PTSD, adultery, capture and escape experienced by the men of the 100th. De facto leads are best-bud majors Cleven and Egan, yin and yang in character but devoted to one another. Gale 'Buck' Cleven (Austin Butler) is contemplative, reserved and a powerhouse leader who'll do whatever it takes to get his boys home; John 'Bucky' Egan (Callum Turner) is a boisterous maverick, a man who sings and screws with the same passion that he flies and fights. Then there's Harry 'Cros' Crosby (Anthony Boyle), a navigator who suffers from air sickness and war-inflicted disassociation from his marriage; Curtis Biddick (Barry Keoghan), a pugilist flyboy; Robert 'Rosie' Rosenthal (Nate Mann), a pilot battling PTSD; Robert Daniels (Ncuti Gatwa), a Tuskegee ace; and Ken Lemmons (Raff Law), an engineer on the ground who patches up the B-17s and counts the planes back into base.

The show also covers the arcs of generals, babyfaced newbies, women and medics who thread through an intense period of time between 1943 and 1945.

With Butler hot off an award-winning *Elvis*, Turner and Keoghan on fire and Gatwa currently playing TV's most famous doctor, Goetzman chuckles at the hat trick of once again casting another company of bellwether stars.

'There's over 300 speaking parts here. [Casting director] Lucy Bevan and her team just did a brilliant job. Who knew we were going to have Doctor Who? I called Tom [Hanks, who had worked with Butler on *Elvis*], and said, "What do you think of this actor, Austin Butler?" He was like [mimics Hanks perfectly], "Dude, I think he's great." We lucked out – it's just a great bunch of guys. I couldn't be prouder of them.'

When *Total Film* catches up with Turner in early December 2023 as he promotes *The Boys in the Boat* (see pages 50-55), he recalls a similar journey to nabbing his role having auditioned for both Cleven and Egan while filming *Fantastic Beasts 3*. 'Colleen Atwood, who was the costume designer on *Fantastic Beasts*, came in, and said, "Gary likes your tape. They really like your tape." I got very excited. Then after Christmas, I was told "OK, you're not Cleven, you're Egan." And I said, "Look, I don't care who I am. Just please let me be a part of this."' Nate Mann was similarly determined to be in the show having grown up in a family who adored the first two series. 'When I eventually got cast on this show my dad, who was just thrilled, had built a model B-17 as a congratulations to me,' he laughs. 'It was covered in glue and paint. It was not quite dry, but it was a beautiful gesture.'

With an epic cast nailed, Spielberg, Hanks and Goetzman built huge sets in the UK and determined that before anyone climbed into a cockpit (more of which later) the diverse group of guys needed to learn to act like a unit. Spielberg brought in his long-time

'I THINK IT ALWAYS FASCINATES PEOPLE WHEN THEY KNOW WHO THEY'RE ROOTING FOR'

GARY GOETZMAN

collaborator, military technical advisor and ex-marine trainer, Dale Dye. Bringing the cast together in 2021 before filming began, 'the boys' – as Goetzman affectionately refers to them – were put through their paces with physical boot-camp and aviation training; 'We wanted to try to give them some camaraderie, get into more of a military mindset.'

GRUNT WORK

'It was [Dye's] idea to put all the people who were playing majors, which was me, Callum, Nate, Austin, and a couple of the other lads, in a nicer hotel than the lads who were playing the cadets or whatever – to start that psychological bridge [to the characters and rank],' Anthony Boyle laughs when *TF* chats to him via Zoom, his accent back to his native Belfast after a year of Crosby's American burr. 'He calls you by your character name. I would put my hands in my pockets, and he would say, "Crosby, get your dick skinners out of your pants!" And you go, "Sir! Yes, sir!" If you give yourself to it, you get a lot out of it.'

Mann recalls the constant marching Dye had the team do. 'I remember going, at the beginning, "Why are we marching? I don't think we do any marching in the show. What's this about?" After three days of it or so, we started to get a sense of real unison. We started to actually not just move as one, but we started to think as one.' Turner and Butler leaned into their roles as leaders ('I'd follow those guys into battle no question, I would march behind them,' Mann enthuses), and as the 10-men teams learned how to use their planes with aviation classes from military-history experts, real friendships grew that reflected those on the page. 'It's one of those cringe things to be like, "We all became a family,"' Boyle shudders, 'But coming to work with 250 lads, and everyone's just fucking buzzing – it felt like a playground. Everyone felt it was such a privilege to be there. You know, sometimes you can be on set, and people are going, "I'm here for the money. I'm here to take this job." But because of the prestige of *Band of Brothers*; because the scripts were so good; because it's fucking Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, everyone was so excited and wanting to give it their best.'

'Your B-17 crew – they're the men who you're entrusting with your life, and therefore these are the men that you're going to get the closest to,' says Mann. 'That ended up being very true in the show, because you're spending all of your time in the cockpit – in my case, with the actor Josh Bolt, who I became very close with and we're still really close to this day.' For Turner and Butler, the brotherly love that weaves through the show wasn't something the actors had to work at concocting. 'We just hung out with each other all the time, as much as possible,' Turner recalls of his still-strong friendship with the *Dune: Part Two* star. 'And we were just unbelievably kind to one another from minute one. I guess we just teased each other and looked after each other simultaneously. It was beautiful working with him. He's such an incredible actor, and I learned so much from working with him, and as a man. Some days, I would go just to entertain Austin. If I didn't make him laugh, I wasn't doing my job. He was such a safe place, and I hope he feels the same with me, because we just loved each other.'

'I'D FOLLOW THOSE GUYS INTO BATTLE NO QUESTION, I WOULD MARCH BEHIND THEM'
NATE MANN

That pre-shoot training and bonding informed the drama when it came to calling action. 'It's interesting, because these boys would come [into the show], and when they "died", they would go,' Turner muses. 'It was like it was real – we would miss their presence. They'd be replaced by someone else who was coming in for episode seven or whatever. Obviously, it could never match really losing someone, but there was the essence of that. It was a great process.'

SCREEN TEST

As the lads got into filming, Turner devised competitive games to pit crews against each other. 'You had to get from laying on the ground, up into the hold [of the plane], and then into the pilot's seat as quickly as possible,' he laughs. 'Not an easy thing to do. You have to do a reverse pull-up, and swing your legs up… you can see it in the show.' 'It was ultimately just a fun way to practise trying to get in and out of this cockpit, which, for the purpose of this show, we had to make it look like we'd done it 100 times,' nods Mann. No ordinary cockpits either. With real B-17s no longer suitable

The team spent time training and marching together to build genuine camaraderie

New Doctor Who Ncuti Gatwa plays airman Robert Daniels

The series continues to explore themes of death, courage, PTSD and more

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Would you trust your life to these men? Many of the cast now would

for flying and using for filming, Hanks, Spielberg and Goetzman decided to use CG technology to craft visuals to trick both cast and audience into believing they were in the midst of thundering flak, buzzed by gunfire of German pilots, trying to bring 10 men back from the prospect of death in a limping B-17 hulk, with glitchy engines, leaking fuel and freezing temperatures at 25,000ft.

'We built a couple of planes from scratch, a couple of extra cockpits, and the fuselage of the plane, and the tail gunner positions,' Goetzman explains. 'A lot of that, we could shoot on stage. Really, it's primarily a CGI situation – so it's just about those cockpits, and making those boys feel like they're really in it. So it's having screens around them, and having [CG] planes fly by them in real time. That process – it felt like they were in those planes. And everything in those planes was real, and everything that they were instructed to do; they had real pilots who'd flown B-17s, giving them their expertise on how to move even a knob.'

'Gary and Apple really set us up to succeed,' says Turner. 'One of the most incredible things about that was that we had this technology called The Volume. It's probably like 20 or 25 screens around a rig. So you're immersed in the sky or the ground or wherever you are in the plane, and you're sitting in your section of the plane. It had, at its most complete stage, two-thirds of a B-17. So you could manoeuvre it around, and the cameras would follow you. There were so many cameras. In the cockpit alone, there were probably 18 cameras that had all the different angles. And it was on a rig, a gimbal, and the rig felt like a theme park ride. So it would react as the plane would be reacting. It was such a beautiful place to play in. The planes flying over or coming towards you – it feels like it. And once we were in, we would stay in there. These guys would go on nine-hour missions, we'd be in there six hours. So you know, the sweat was real. It just adds to the feeling of being trapped in there.'

With so many screens surrounding the gimbal rig, the heat was certainly on according to Boyle. 'I've tried to cancel it from my brain! I'm getting fucking war flashbacks now,' he chuckles. 'It was so hot with the screens on this rig 60ft up in the air that they gave us these Formula One suits to cool us down. It was the middle of summer and you've got all the gear on, the sheepskin jacket. The Formula One jackets are essentially just wires or tubes, and then you've got a big gallon of freezing cold water. Whenever you were overheating, you'd stick it on and it'd blast around you. There was no acting required, because you were just actually trying to fucking survive. It was great.'

Though the lads jest about PTSD, *Masters of the Air* explores the very real mental-health challenges of war alongside the der-doing. 'Post-traumatic stress disorder as we understand it today is very different from how it was understood at the time,' says Mann, whose arc includes Rosie coming to terms with the grief, sorrow, survivor guilt and trauma of dealing with daily death. 'Our way of connecting to that, and really folding that into the show, was about how these men were able to really support one other. That's what the show is about: we're all fighting for one another.'

Fighting in the sky and in the pub – and internally. As the show progresses, the personalities of all the characters evolve and change, compressed and heightened by extraordinary circumstances. 'They say that when you're at war, your personality blows up times 10,' muses Turner. 'Egan's natural starting point is to be fun, and to enjoy and live life to the full. So when he's faced with death, it's accentuated. For Cleven, he's quieter and he would become more quiet, more reserved, go into himself. I can't imagine what it was like for these men to do this. Everything about it is just the most traumatic thing you've heard.'

For Goetzman, the show is another chance to explore the numerous tales of courage – to represent the key efforts of the Tuskegee airmen, show the guts of teenage boys climbing into gun turrets, explore the efforts of the French Resistance, the spy network and the support (emotional, sexual, logistical) of women in all walks of life on the ground.

And for Turner it's a chance for 21st-century audiences to remember the sacrifices made by a generation. 'I think it's so important to remember and honour what these guys went through to provide the space that we live in. Most of the people that lived through World War Two, and managed to survive that, are no longer with us. It's no longer within our living memory. I think it's so important that we tell that story. I guess it's not easily repeated, but we don't want to repeat our mistakes as humans.'

And, it's also a blast hanging out with these guys over nine hours? 'Yeah, the truth is I just kind of want to go out on a night out with Buck and Bucky, and have a good time with them.' Buckle up, lads. Time to rack 'em up and knock 'em down…

MASTERS OF THE AIR STREAMS ON APPLE TV+ FROM 26 JANUARY (TWO-EPISODE PREMIERE FOLLOWED BY WEEKLY EPISODES)

CREW GRIT

George Clooney and **Callum Turner** tell *Total Film* about the hard work (and play) that went into recreating a historical sporting moment in *The Boys in the Boat*. Ready all, row...

WORDS **JANE CROWTHER**

USA

If George Clooney likes you, he'll give you shit. And as director of the true story of a plucky University of Washington rowing team making it all the way to the 1936 Olympics in Berlin with the spectre of war hanging over proceedings, he joshed with his lead, Callum Turner, playing underdog sculling star Joe Rantz. That banter continues on a drizzly December day in a suite in London's Corinthia Hotel as the duo discuss their project with *Total Film*, with diversions into shared favourite films (*All the President's Men*) and poring over a phone to look at pictures of recent co-stars mucking about on set. 'Tough love,' Clooney smiles when Turner complains about faint praise for his rowing skills, but the fraternal bond is evident in their easy chemistry and Turner's admission that his director called him in for post-shoot ADR just to see him. 'He brought me in just to say hello,' he chuckles. 'It was five minutes. He was like, "All right, see you later."'

Clooney, casual in a black polo shirt and jeans, shrugs. He's still, he says, after four decades in the business, like a kid at work. 'What we get to do for a living is fun. It's hard work. We'll work 16-hour days. But it's a privilege. I love walking onto set. I love watching. I'll sit on set, and I'll watch smart actors finding their way.' Turner, rangy, and dressed in a green cardigan, nods. 'With George it was a masterclass every single day,' he says warmly of the experience. A rising tide lifts all boats, as they say. But back to the kidding…

George, you've directed a couple of films set in this time period. What is it about this era that's so attractive to you when looking for a project?

George Clooney: Well, I don't actually run towards period pieces, but I found some very simplistic, interesting stories. I like to do films that are challenging. And then, this one, the challenge was about making the film, not about the story. This is one where we know where you're going to stand on it. You're against Hitler unless, you know, you're some knucklehead! And we were rooting for this team to win. We're rooting for these guys. That's a fun, simplistic story.

And then it's about trying to remind ourselves of how we acted and talked, which is different. We didn't say 'you know' in the middle, and we didn't talk about our emotions.

The underdog rowing team took on richer athletes – and then the Nazis

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Callum Turner plays impoverished student and rower Joe Rantz

Director Clooney keeps things on track

Callum Turner: Yeah, we're diving into that world and that time, and immersing ourselves – thinking about those old guys like Gary Cooper and Spencer Tracy, and watching them, and how they move, and how they spoke.
George Clooney: What's funny is that even the background actors, when [the team] win the race, the first take, they all high-fived each other. I go, 'No high fives, dudes. They didn't have them.'
Callum Turner: Guys barely touched each other. Touching someone was a really big thing. You shook a hand, and that would be about it.
George Clooney: And we've both played organised sports. Coaches were tough, man. Right now, we're kind of examining all those things, and whether that's good or not. It was good for me. I enjoyed it.
Callum Turner: Me as well.
George Clooney: I liked the structure… I played baseball and basketball.
Callum Turner: He's an incredible basketball player. He dunked on us. He was schooling all of us. We were trying our hardest [laughs].
George Clooney: It was fun, man. I've got two six-year-olds. I really am focused on making sure that they get involved in some kind of organised sport, because you learn respect and discipline and teamwork.
Callum Turner: And responsibility. You have to show up for other people. You can't let them down.
George Clooney: You also learn about losing. Losing is the most important lesson. You never learn anything about winning. You just don't. If you were to learn anything, you learn how great you are. I remember when I was seven years old playing baseball, and I dropped a flyball to lose the game. I walked home. It was a long way – crying, crying, crying, the whole way. Then my dad took me outside, and hit me flyballs for the next six months. I came back, and I was the best player on the team. And I was determined to be the best.

Callum, you trained with the cast of *Masters of the Air* before this [pages 44-49] and learned to become a unit there. Did that prepare you for becoming a team on this?
Callum Turner: I would say yes, but then this was also a completely different experience. George set us up to succeed. We had two months of training prior to shooting in which we rowed for four hours a day, and we worked out for an extra hour. We ate together. We rode home together. We drank together.
George Clooney: Fought.
Callum Turner: We did, yeah. We really fought together. We learned a skill, and we did it all together. We had to look after each other. And that's what the boat is. It's about being part of the team, and being one.
George Clooney: The rowing is really important – right? If we don't get the rowing right, we've messed up. But if you don't care about the guys, you lose – period. So part of the camaraderie of them learning to row was also them learning to be together. They fight, and they laugh, and they have a drink, and they do all the things that these boys did.

Had you ever rowed before this?
Callum Turner: Never rowed before. None of us had. We thought we were amazing. George would come down with Grant [Heslov, producer], and, oh my God, we were awful [laughs].
George Clooney: We're following them in a motorboat. I'm watching them, and the paddles were all flying. It was over, and I gave them a thumbs-up, like, 'Way to go.' Grant and I got in the car, and I said, 'What are we going to do?' I literally didn't know what to do. I was like, 'We could try replacing their heads digitally. I don't know.' Because it was like, 'This is a disaster.'
Callum Turner: They were in the car thinking that, and we were in the gym, silent, thinking that. Because we felt like we had come a long way, and we could see, through the smile, the pain from George's soul.
George Clooney: My acting was not very good that day.

As Coach Ulbrickson (Joel Edgerton) says in the film, this is the hardest team sport in the world, and it's going to test your body. Can you attest to that?
Callum Turner: Absolutely, yeah. I was exhausted.
George Clooney: Their hands were bleeding. All of them.
Callum Turner: But physically – you know, after five or six hours or seven hours of work, I'd get home at three in the afternoon, and I'd just sit in the bath, and watch *Going for Gold*, with my dog laying there.
George Clooney: Also, when these guys are rowing in the real world, they row for a couple of hours. When we're shooting a movie, we're rowing for eight or nine hours. So that's hard. And they're rowing in these wooden boats with wooden oars. So they're not using the same equipment that the guys use now. They're much heavier and much clunkier.

You had pro rowers racing you in that final. So how did you do against them?

George Clooney: Well, there was one moment where they actually thought they were kicking ass, and then I literally walked over to Callum, and I said, 'You know I told them to slow down, right?'
Callum Turner: We plummeted back down to Earth.
George Clooney: Rowers take this stuff very [seriously]. I'm a basketball player, right? When I watch a certain actor in *White Men Can't Jump* – for instance, Woody Harrelson is a good basketball player. I've played basketball with him for 35 years. He's a good basketball player. But other people in it, if they're looking at the ball when they dribble, you watch it going, 'That's not a basketball player.' And it makes a difference, because people do know the sport. So we were very aware of making sure that these guys looked like they knew what they were doing. And they did. By the time we finished, these guys all wanted to go to Henley and compete.
Callum Turner: There was maybe some overestimating!

How was it filming on the water, because obviously Spielberg didn't have a great time with *Jaws*. Tricky?
George Clooney: It's not the easiest, was it?
Callum Turner: No, but you planned it so well, and worked it out.
George Clooney: I did *The Perfect Storm* 25 years ago, so I knew it was going to be ugly. And it was rough. I'd forgotten how bad it was. You forget after 25 years. It's like having children. After 25 years, you do it again. No, it was hard because everything slows down. You can't anchor the boats down. The wind will blow them all off. And if you have eight of them across, it just gets to be too hard to do.

And, remember, we probably had seven or eight motorised boats following them. We've got a sound boat. We've got three camera boats. We've got a drone boat. We've got all these things moving. You can't have these guys row full-out for eight hours a day. You can't do it. The pros couldn't do it. So we really had to consolidate what we were shooting.

George, did you ever consider acting in the film, too? Maybe taking the role of the coach?
George Clooney: No, I'm way too old for that guy. And, also, it's not fun directing yourself. It's so much more fun to watch other people and be critical of them than be critical of yourself [laughs].

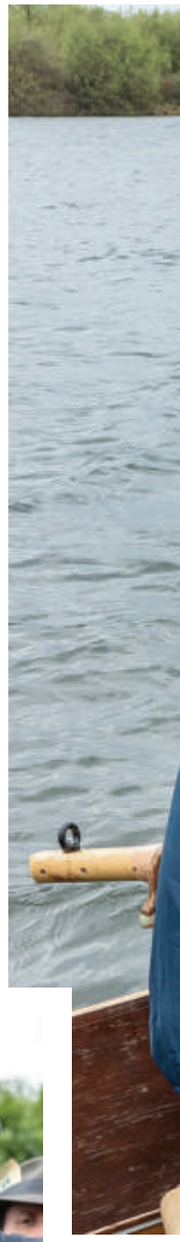
Callum, what is it like being directed by an actor who knows what he's doing on both sides of the camera?
Callum Turner: I was going to make a joke but it was lovely. It was wonderful.
George Clooney: You can make a joke.
Callum Turner: It was a nightmare.
George Clooney: Yes, it was.
Callum Turner: Every day. Can't you tell?
George Clooney: I would say, 'That's not how you're going to do it, is it?'
Callum Turner: No, it was a masterclass… how prepared he is, with the camera. He edits in his head. And after about five days, we developed a shorthand.
George Clooney: Callum's an instinctive actor. He knows what to do. He knows what the scene needs. A lot of actors know what the character needs, which is great, but understanding what the whole is, as opposed to what the micro is, is really important. And he understood that.
Callum Turner: Every single day, I was learning. I was open to it. We talked about old-school movie stars. We talked about Gary Cooper and Spencer Tracy, and *Judgment at Nuremberg* and *Inherit the Wind* and *High Noon* were big inspirations. We really built that together. He's such a generous guy and such a generous director. And it was like a big-brother vibe on set. He'd tease me.
George Clooney: Well, if I was going to give anyone shit, it was him.
Callum Turner: But by doing that, that's the most supportive thing. Nothing's serious.
George Clooney: No, you never want to hurt anybody. But you do really want to give everybody shit.

George, you said that you learned by mistakes. Have you learned from the previous sets you've been on how not to run a set?
George Clooney: Well, I've been on sets with miserable directors. I've been on sets with directors who yell and scream. To me, it doesn't matter what the product is at that point. This is a job where there's 300 people on the set trying to do the best they can. There is no reason and no purpose for people being treated badly. I hate it, and I won't do it.

I've had directors who I like personally, but I know them reputationally, and within the last few months they've come to me and said, 'When are we going to work together?' And I go, 'We're never going to work together, dude. I think you're great, but I'll never work with you because you're mean, and I can't be around it.'

Joel Edgerton also stars as team coach Al Ulbrickson

Clooney trying to be gentle about the team's lack of rowing skills



LAURIE SPARHAM. METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES. WARNER BROS.

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The cast and crew faced a logistical challenge filming training and race sequences on the water

We're lucky. We get to not grow up. I'm 62 years old and I'm a 12-year-old. I write screenplays. I get to write 'Rome burns', and somebody builds Rome and sets it on fire. What a great, fun thing. It's a privilege. And I've been lucky in my career. If people don't think that I'm enjoying it, then what's wrong with me?

Callum Turner: People warned me before I stepped onto the set that I was going to have a really good time with George. And I did. It was a harmonious set. He runs it like the leader of people.

George Clooney: We had a really good time. We also hire people that want to be there. There are also actors that can be just as big a pain in the ass as directors. I'm sure you've met some of them.

This is a period story, but it feels relevant to today's world with the themes of fascism…

George Clooney: Well, here's what I kind of hope: that the message of the movie is that we're all in this together. I've always been very politically active. I've gotten in trouble for it over the years. I don't mind. But I also think that what we forget, particularly in the times when it's trickiest, [is that] the differences between us are very small. And, for the most part, everything gets amplified too big. For the most part, we all want the same things. We want our family to be happy, we want to be healthy, we want to love one another – for the most part. Perspective gets lost. That's what we're seeing more with the internet and 24-hour news. We start to see only these fringes, and it feels as if it's taken over the world. I have so many people who I disagree with politically who I'm very good friends with. And when we were doing this film, we wanted to remind ourselves as we were doing it that we really like each other, and we really root for one another for the most part. And the only times we don't is when we focus on the fringes.

So we've talked to you, Callum, about your next project *Masters of the Air*, but we'd also love to know about your upcoming thriller *Wolves*, George. You'll be reteaming with your old buddy Brad Pitt…

George Clooney: Yeah, that pretty boy Pitt. That poor man.

Callum Turner: Yeah, that poor man. I feel for him.

George Clooney: He's a sad, sad guy. He's angry. He's getting old. He's turning 60 in a couple of weeks. It's all downhill for him after that. Uh… It's a really good movie. I love this guy, Jon Watts. What a director. It's out there. We just did a screening of it, and the place kind of went batshit for it. So we're excited about it. We think it's a really fun, dark – very dark – nutty film… It feels like an R-rated Ocean's film.

Callum Turner: I'm excited for that!

THE BOYS IN THE BOAT OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 12 JANUARY.

SPY GAMES

James Bond would need a nice sit-down after watching **ARGYLLE**, a super-spy movie that explodes with crazed ideas, mischievous twists and truly bonkers action as it turns the genre inside out. *Total Film*'s mission? To interrogate director Matthew Vaughn and stars Henry Cavill and Bryce Dallas Howard as to, well, WTF?

WORDS JAMIE GRAHAM

Matthew Vaughn is sitting in his study, twisting his head from side to side, the peak of his cap slicing and slashing. The director of *Kick-Ass* and the Kingsman trilogy is frantically looking for Chip. You know Chip. Everyone does. He's the cat in Vaughn's new spy thriller *Argylle*. That's right, the impossibly cute furball who peers out the window of Bryce Dallas Howard's designer carrier, then finds himself variously hurled out of a train, parachuting through the sky and plummeting off a building as the action kicks in. Chip, or Alfie as he's named in the movie, was an instant internet sensation, threatening to become cinema's most celebrated feline since Jonesy padded around the USCSS Nostromo. And he belongs to Vaughn's wife, Claudia Schiffer.

'Chip's not here,' concedes Vaughn with a sigh. 'Sometimes he comes in for a cameo.' But before you go thinking this is some nepo cat, you should know that Chip actually saved the day when the pro cat failed to shine. 'We had an acting cat on the first day, and… I don't know. It was very expensive, and, as far as I could tell, it was just a cat. So I was like, "This isn't going to work." Cue Chip. 'It's my wife's cat, but also my daughter's. I'm a dog person. I grabbed him. I said, "I need to borrow Chip." I didn't think it through, because it's a bit weird, sharing a car at six in the morning with a cat. The cat's sitting next to me in the trailer.' He shakes his head resignedly. 'I was the cat handler, bringing it onto set. As I said, I'm not a big cat person, ➳

⋙ but by the end of it, I fell in love with this cat. The cat's fucking incredible. He actually steals the bloody movie. It's ridiculous. Soon, I'm going to be doing talk shows and I'm going to give Blofeld a fucking run for his money.'

Sharing the screen with Chip are Bryce Dallas Howard, Henry Cavill and Sam Rockwell, and, in smaller roles, Bryan Cranston, Ariana DeBose, Dua Lipa, Samuel L. Jackson, John Cena, Catherine O'Hara and Sofia Boutella. A stacked cast, which is what happens when everyone wants to work with a director. And when said director personally sends you a script the like of which you've never seen before.

'You can't anticipate what to expect,' says Howard. 'You can't predict where things go.' Cavill agrees. 'There are many, many twists and turns, and it makes it exciting. There are millions of scripts out there, so it's really nice to read something where you go, "Oh, it's different." It keeps it interesting, rather than just the same old, same old.'

It's hard to think of another movie with so many twists and turns. Classic film noirs like *The Big Sleep* and *Out of the Past*, perhaps. Vaughn mentions mystery thriller *Charade*, with Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn. It's one of his favourites, and a key influence on *Argylle*, along with action adventure *Romancing the Stone*, Bond movies, obviously, and 80s action flicks like *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon*.

'You're thinking, "Oh, what? Oh, fuck. Oh, hey?" grins Vaughn of *Charade*, before considering his own movie's giddy plotting. 'I was like, "Well, fuck it. If you're on a rollercoaster, you want to go up, down, sideways, and own it." The studio was like, "Oh, well, maybe it's too many?" I was like, "Fuck it. How can you have too many? That's the fun of this movie. Let's just go for it."'

LITERARY AGENT

As to just what all this bedlam is about, let's stick to the slightest of setups in order to keep the surprises intact. Below is no more than you'll discover by watching the first trailer, which is all taken from the first 28 minutes of the movie.

The cyclone plot revolves around Elly Conway (Howard), an author of a series of spy novels that follow the intrepid adventures of the impossibly suave Agent Argylle (Cavill) and his partner Wyatt (John Cena). Only Elly's latest page-turner has touched upon some top-secret truths in the real world of espionage, and suddenly she finds herself the target of syndicate boss Ritter (Bryan Cranston). Enter Aiden Wilde (Sam Rockwell), a good-guy spy who might not look like the Argylle in Elly's mind's eye, but certainly packs his fight moves. One minute our introverted novelist is tapping keys and smiling politely at book signings, the next she's whisked off around the globe, with killer goons looking to stamp her ticket at every turn. Meanwhile, Vaughn and screenwriter Jason Fuchs (*Pan*, *Wonder Woman*) find clever ways to flit between this real-world

Samuel L. Jackson is another player in Argylle's espionage game

Henry Cavill, Dua Lipa and John Cena

Bryce Dallas Howard plays author Elly Conway

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Aiden (Sam Rockwell) and Elly find themselves flung together

action and the fictional adventures of Argylle, with the twin stories circling and paralleling and entwining one another to dizzying effect.

It's all mega complicated, or rather meta complicated, for this movie is actually based on a novel by Elly Conway, with Fuchs and Vaughn turning it inside out by putting the actual author into the story – think a bemused Stephen King wandering the corridors of the Overlook Hotel. Oh, and Conway may or may not be real. She's a mystery. Her biography on Penguin Random House says she was born and raised in upstate New York, and wrote Argylle 'while working as a waitress in a late-night diner'. It sounds like something out of a movie, and there is speculation that Elly Conway is a pen name, with one theory having it that the actual writer is – wait for it – Taylor Swift. According to certain conspiracy theorists, the aforementioned cat Alfie is actually inspired by one of the singer-songwriter's own beloved kitties, Meredith Grey.

No one's going to discuss the Conway speculation now. But if the author isn't real, then Vaughn's playing a strong hand of poker, leafing through the manuscript of her next novel as he chats to *Total Film*. Heck, even without the Conway conundrum, it's a fiendishly dicey affair to chat about *Argylle*, for no-one wants to spoil the corkscrew plotting. Or, put another way, to let the cat out the bag.

'This is my first interview… I'm almost looking to you to thread this needle,' pleads Howard. 'How do you declare to everyone, "Hey we're throwing a party. We can't give you the agenda to the party, but it's going to be insane! You're not going to want to miss this party! But we can't tell you why!"'

OK, let's start with basics – how Howard and Cavill got invited to the party in the first place. Both, it turns out, have long been on Vaughn's radar. In Howard's case, she read for the lead in the director's 2007 movie *Stardust*. 'She gave the best audition,' recalls Vaughn, 'and I rang up Paramount and was like, "Oh my God, we've found Yvaine. She's amazing." Paramount went, "No, she's not famous enough." They wouldn't let me cast her.' Vaughn's wanted to work with her ever since.

DATE MOVIE

Matthew Vaughn on why he's tamed down his signature violence...

'I wanted to make the ultimate date movie. It'll be out just before Valentine's Day. When we test-screened it... I don't know if this is an insult or a compliment, but one of the anonymous things went, "This is the first Matthew Vaughn movie I feel comfortable sharing with my wife."

'I went to see *Romancing the Stone* on a date. I was very young and inexperienced, and I didn't know what to do. And somebody said, "Always go on a date to the cinema, because then you don't have to talk. I was like, "I fucking like that idea." I went in thinking I would be bored out of mind, and I'd pretend to like it, and then I'd have something to talk about. And I loved it more than her. So I had a movie that we both enjoyed, and I got my first kiss. It was a bloody good night.

'Right now, everyone needs a warm hug, and we need to feel happy. I'm hoping that people will come out and just appreciate that *Argylle* is warm. It's a ray of sunshine in a very dark world.

'But we had to cut a lot of stuff out to go PG-13. I couldn't help myself on the set. And there was a little bit of me where I thought, "Fuck it, should we splat his head at the end? You see everyone's face, and then – boom – you see his head explode like a watermelon. And then everyone's going, 'What the fuck just happened?'" ***JG***

Argylle's mission takes him onto the dancefloor

As for Cavill, it was even easier. 'He's a lovely man, and I'm getting to the age where I want to work with people that I get on with,' shrugs Vaughn. Really, that's it? 'With this movie, a lot of it is taking tropes and turning them on their head,' he elaborates. 'I needed someone that, when he walks in the room, it's like, "OK, it's a superspy. I get it." So the journey just begins immediately, and sets it in a place for us to then start changing and rearranging shit. It's shorthand. It makes the movie 10 minutes fucking shorter. You know, Bowie said he was an instant star – just add water and stir. That's what I'm getting from Cavill.'

Vaughn laughs. 'And he can rock a flattop. I know a lot of people are like, "What's the point of that stupid haircut?" I'm like, "Watch the movie. Trust me, when I was a kid, we thought Ivan Drago looked fucking cool. So fuck you."'

'Matthew came up with it, and said, "Look, trust me, I can make it look good,' says Cavill of his heroic hairdo. 'You know what? You don't just wake up and have a flattop. It takes work. I don't know if I have the time or the patience for that kind of carry-on when it comes to my hair, in real life.'

Agent Argylle is a far cry from real life. Most movies, of course, romanticise the notion of spies to begin with. But this one especially so. Our handsome hero is straight out the pages of a glossy bestseller. Such perfection is impossible to maintain. Heck, even for erstwhile Superman Cavill, there must have been days where playing such a fantasy figure was a stretch.

'You mean every day?' he chuckles. 'It's called "acting" for a reason. You go in there, do your thing, and hope that you pull it off. It's a fun character to play, though. I mean, if characters have flaws, obviously there's more to do with them. So someone so idealised becomes slightly more difficult, because how do you make it interesting? A flattop certainly helps.'

AND... ACTION!

Making *Argylle* was not without its travails. For starters, it shot between August 2021 and January 2022, when movie productions were tightly constrained by COVID-19 regulations. As you'd expect, Vaughn is typically frank: 'Making a movie where we're all wearing masks is fucking weird. You're giving direction, and they're like, "What?" And you're like, "Fuck it. Hold on. I'll take it down." [Mimes pulling mask down] 'La la la la la.' [Mimes putting mask back up] "You're not allowed to take your mask down!" "But he can't understand what I'm fucking saying!"'

Then, tragically, there was the death of Brad Allan of a heart attack, aged 48. The Australian martial artist, stunt performer, actor and action choreographer was an industry legend, having worked on the Jackie Chan Stunt Team and such Hollywood behemoths as *Pacific Rim*, *Wonder Woman* and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. Allan had hugely contributed to Vaughn's previous movies *Kick-Ass* and the Kingsman trilogy, and his pre-production work on *Argylle* will stand as his final gift to the movies. Its innovation is invigorating.

Elly is totally unprepared for her change of circumstances

'Watching the same fucking action sequence from another movie is boring,' sighs Vaughn. 'I went, "I love dance, cinema, pop video, ballet. OK, let's do that."' There are set pieces here, shot in-camera, that you've never seen on screen before. OK, so John Woo's gun battles are balletic and Edgar Wright choreographed car chases to music in *Baby Driver*, but these take it further. In one sequence, Rockwell's background in dance is put to good use. In another, there's death, and lots of it, by ice skating.

'I grew up in the 80s where we had to watch fucking ice skating on a Sunday because we had nothing else to watch,' recalls Vaughn. 'Torvill and fucking Dean. *Boléro*. I remember thinking "wow" when they started doing the spinning and stuff. I was like, "That's fucking lethal and cool." I thought of a woman using a blade in the style of ice skating. That's where that came from. It was fucking hard to pull off, I've got to tell you. Bryce did as much as possible. *Dancing on Ice*, eat your fucking heart out.'

'I love shooting action. Love it. Love it. LOVE IT!' hollers Howard. 'I've done Jurassic and Spider-Man and Twilight and Terminator. Matthew's been a part of a new movement over the last 15 or so years where action has got to a completely different level.' Vaughn's told *Total Film* that she's a black belt at judo... 'I'm not

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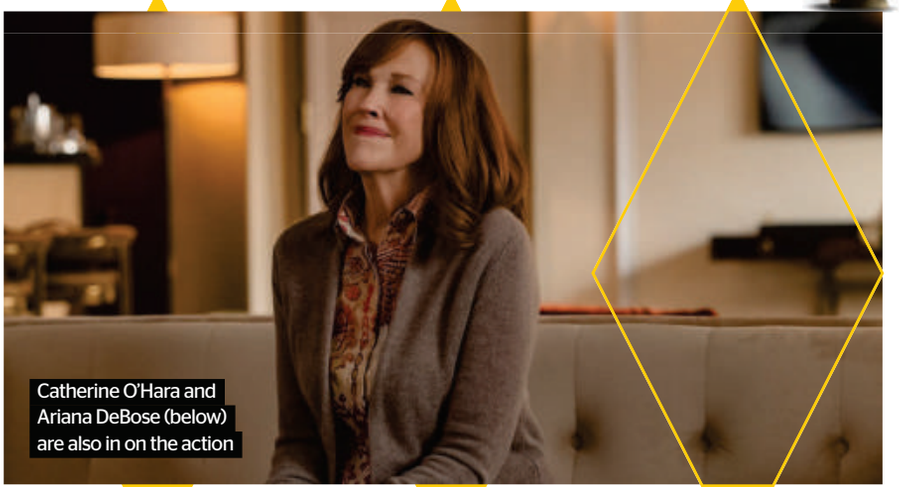

Catherine O'Hara and Ariana DeBose (below) are also in on the action

a black belt! I'm close to it. When I was a kid, karate was my life. Training for stunts makes me very excited. This movie is spectacular!'

It's also, in typical Vaughn style, cheekily funny. Who else would stop an action scene halfway through so that his leading lady could remove her shoes to enable her to run properly? It's surely a wink to Heelgate, which followed fast on the, well, heels of the release of *Jurassic World*, when Howard's character, Claire Dearing, runs from the dinosaurs in Sam Edelman high heel pumps.

Howard cracks up. 'Oh goodness! I'm going to be boring here. This was a choice made on assessing what the character would do in that moment. It had to do with stealth, as that was the set piece.' Hmmm. 'But after the fact, my publicist saw the movie and I was like, "Oh my God, I didn't even realise that! That's wild!"'

Wild is a word that Cavill affectionately and appreciatively applies to Vaughn. 'Matthew's an outside-the-box thinker,' he says. 'Anything that he brings is going to be different from your usual fare. It's refreshing. And the stunt team was absolutely fantastic. They came up with some really, really interesting and new things.'

The good news is that Vaughn's only just warming up. Should *Argylle* succeed in the director's mission to get audiences invested in

'THERE ARE MANY, MANY TWISTS AND TURNS AND IT MAKES IT EXCITING'
HENRY CAVILL

new IP built on kamikaze storytelling and gonzo action, he has the next two movies lined up. They will be based on forthcoming novels by Taylor Swift… sorry, Elly Conway. And while this movie was his own meta-mischief take on the material, the next ones will cleave closer to the books.

'Book one is about: how did Argylle become a spy? That will be the next film. And then Argylle 2 is – I don't want to give it all away, but there's the young Argylle, and that becomes Henry, because Henry loves the idea of doing a proper Argylle movie as well.'

'It's a fun character,' says Cavill – who, by the way, doesn't think that his playing Argylle keeps him from possibly being the next James Bond ('Whether I'm ruled out of Bond because of this or not is up to Barbara Broccoli and Mr. Wilson,' he says).

Howard is also on board, should Elly be needed. 'Oh, absolutely,' she starts, but won't say a word more for fear of spoilers. If you want to find out, you'll need to support *Argylle* in theatres.

'Everybody complains there's not enough original stuff, but it's because they don't go see it,' says Vaughn. 'People have got to buy tickets first, or there won't be fucking anything.'

ARGYLLE OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 2 FEBRUARY.

RING OF

POWER

Tipped for awards glory, true-life wrestling drama **THE IRON CLAW** tells the extraordinary story of the Von Erich family, champions in the ring and cursed in life. *Total Film* grapples with director Sean Durkin and hears from stars Zac Efron, Jeremy Allen White and Harris Dickinson to pin down how such awe-inspiring triumph can come from such terrible adversity...

WORDS **JAMIE GRAHAM**

‘WHEN I WAS A KID, I USED TO GET ALL MY FRIENDS TOGETHER AND MAKE THEM WRESTLE,’

smiles writer/director Sean Durkin, explaining why he found it easy to shoot the ‘full-blown action’ scenes in true-life wrestling drama *The Iron Claw* despite his earlier movies, *Martha Marcy May Marlene* and *The Nest*, containing nothing of the sort. ‘I was about 10. I’d write my friends characters and I used to make my mum film it. So in some ways I’ve been thinking about it my whole life – shooting the wrestling and choreographing it was second nature.’

For *The Iron Claw*, named after a signature wrestling move, Durkin took it up a notch or 10. Instead of shooting in his back garden, he had production designer James Price fashion an auditorium from a huge furniture showroom in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And instead of his string-limbed mates, he had a pumped-up Zac Efron, Jeremy Allen White and Harris Dickinson smacking it down in front of a baying crowd.

‘We filled it with as many people as we could get, and the first scene we shot, there’s someone playing Skandor Akbar, who was one of the most famous villains of that era,’ says Durkin. ‘They walked out before we’d even started to set up and hundreds of people started viciously booing! I was like, “Wow, they are in!” They were such a big part of creating the energy and giving the actors that real vibe to play off. It felt like real events. We’d run the whole match, too. We’d choreograph the whole thing. Mátyás [Erdély, the director of photography] and I approached it like we would any scene: “What’s the emotion here? What are we going to do? Is it going to be one shot? Is it going to be handheld? Is it going to be three shots?” We’d shoot it based on emotion, not just to have stunts.’

But *what* stunts.

‘The drop kick was hard,’ says White, who’s used to the intensity of the kitchen in Disney+ drama *The Bear* but here piled on 40lbs of muscle to be ring-ready.

‘I was scared of the drop kick, I’m not gonna lie,’ laughs Dickinson, whose work in *Beach Rats*, *Triangle of Sadness* and *Scrapper*, though mightily impressive, never took him to these extremes. ‘And there was some crazy stuff that Zac did off the top rope that was ridiculous.’

Efron winces. ‘There was a moment when I jumped off that top rope and Chavo [real-life champion wrestler Chavo Guerrero Jr., who consulted on the film and plays The Sheik] was under me, I’m about to land on him, and I just remember how far away he was. He was so small and I was like, “This is not going to end well…”’

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The cast found themselves bonding almost as much as the famously close family

Lily James stars as Pam Adkisson, who marries wrestler Kevin

READY TO RUMBLE

Born in Canada, Durkin grew up in England. He had wrestle mania from an early age – he'd watch WWF and WCW on telly, and his dad would take him to live events at the Royal Albert Hall whenever there was a tour – and he knew just what to pitch when he sat down with Tessa Ross, the former head of Film4. In 2016, Ross and Juliette Howell, former TV head of Working Title, launched House Productions.

'Tessa Ross said, "If you could do anything, what would it be?" I'd just been thinking about it recently, and I said, "Well, the Von Erichs are the dream project." So we started working on it together.'

For those whose familiarity with wrestling extends to the knowledge that movie stars Dwayne Johnson and John Cena used to glisten with oil, know that the Von Erichs are wrestling royalty. Patriarch Fritz Von Erich (here played by Holt McCallany) was a three-time world champion, and he trained his six sons to follow in his giant footsteps. Kevin (Efron), Kerry (White) and David (Dickinson) had particular success in the 80s and 90s, also becoming champions. But the family story that happened outside of the ring is even more remarkable. No spoilers here, but if *Total Film* might trade fight

> 'IT'S A FAMILY DRAMA. IT'S A CELEBRATION OF BROTHERHOOD'
> **SEAN DURKIN**

games for just a second in order to quote the movies' famous Philly fighter Rocky Balboa, 'Nobody is gonna hit as hard as life.'

'It's a family drama,' says Durkin, who grew up a huge fan of the Von Erich siblings. 'It's a celebration of brotherhood. The family is so large and it's such an epic story, it felt like this mythical American Greek tragedy.'

Before speaking to Durkin and reading the script, none of the leading actors was aware of the Von Erichs and their incredible story in and out of the ring. Here was a story about love, loss and learning, about deep-rooted concepts of masculinity, about ferocious ambition and the terrible hardships that come with sporting success, and about the fallout of that. But most of all it was about camaraderie and wisdom.

'It seems like it's too much to happen to one family,' says Efron, leaning forward in his chair. 'The fact it was all real…' He takes stock. 'It didn't feel as much of a wrestling movie as it was a really great movie about family, and loss.'

In fact, tragedy befell the Von Erichs to such a bewildering extent that the family was considered cursed. But to continue with Rocky's wisdom: 'It ain't about how hard ya hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward.' Efron agrees: 'The film is ultimately being able to triumph. It's really deep.'

TAG TEAM

Wrestlers who muscled their way into movies...

ANDRÉ THE GIANT

The man-mountain French wrestler known as 'the Eighth Wonder of the World' made his US screen debut playing Sasquatch in the TV series *The Six Million Dollar Man*. His horned god is killed by Arnie in *Conan the Barbarian*. Most famously, he played the giant Fezzik in *The Princess Bride*.

RODDY PIPER

One of the 'bad guys' of the WWF in the early 80s, he had a feud with Hulk Hogan. Hogan fought Balboa in *Rocky III*. As for Piper, he fought alien infiltrators in John Carpenter's satire *They Live*, delivering the famous line, 'I have come here to chew bubblegum and kick ass. And I'm all out of bubblegum.'

DWAYNE JOHNSON

The Rock proclaimed himself the People's Champion in the ring, and he's been a box-office champ for more than 20 years now. He fuel-injected the Fast & Furious series when he joined the fifth film, and played a good game with the Jumanji movies. His best work, as an actor, is in HBO American-football drama *Ballers*.

JOHN CENA

Weighing 240lbs, Cena played football in college and then became a WWF champ. He made his acting debut in action comedy drama *The Marine*, and has lit up *Blockers*, *Bumblebee* and *Fast X*. Don't miss him as Peacemaker – in James Gunn's *The Suicide Squad* and the ace TV series that followed.

DAVE BAUTISTA

World heavyweight champion Bautista, aka 'The Animal', is most dearly known to moviegoers as warrior Drax in the MCU. Bautista has a knack for landing quality projects: *Blade Runner 2049*, the Dune movies, and voicing the Parakeet King in Ghibli's latest, *The Boy and the Heron*. *Escape Plan 2*, not so much. **JG**

'I wasn't familiar [with the Von Erichs],' says White. 'But there was this mythicism and also a fantasy aspect because the story is so unbelievable. How could so much happen to this one family? These men were larger than life.'

Dickinson offers a rueful smile. 'Whenever WWF came to London, I'd go to see it with my mate. I was a bit of a fanboy. I wanted Rey Mysterio to kick me in the head. But I wasn't aware of this era of wrestling. The delicacy of this story was really intriguing to me.'

All of the actors were in awe of Durkin's sure touch when it came to fashioning reams of material into what is certain to be one of the films of 2024 – *The Iron Claw* succeeds as a rousing sports drama, a piercing character study and a nuanced adult drama that's devoid of clichés. But then Durkin is drawn to studying families of all stripes and colours.

'I feel like I've made a family trilogy,' he grins. '*Martha...*, *The Nest* and this are all about... I don't want to say strange families, but particular families, very different kinds of families. Families and a sense of belonging and ideas of masculinity and how they can crush people in different ways, or whether you can fight through those things.'

So where does that come from? Does Durkin himself have a 'particular' family? 'Yeah, definitely, I have a pretty unusual family, and I made a lot of families along the way. When I was young, I got very close to my friends' families, and I went to boarding school and made a family there. The idea of brotherhood.' Does he care to expand on just why he considers his own family to be unusual? Beyond moving around a lot, for Durkin was also uprooted to Manhattan when he was 12. 'Not really,' he says. 'Just... unconventional. Which leads me to love the particularities of different kinds of family. Not judging character, not judging what are family values. I think they're sort of arbitrary. Families decide what their values are and then people are raised in them and accept them as fact, then get out into the world and realise it's not the only way it can be.'

Interestingly, the cast quickly made their own family unit on the Baton Rouge set. Just as the Von Erich boys banded together in pursuit of their goals, so the actors playing them formed an unbreakable alliance.

White shrugs. 'It was so easy. Having that time with Chavo and these guys before we got to filming, trying to work out this new skill as best

A24, LIONSGATE

Not-so-mellow yellow: Harris Dickinson as David Von Erich

we could, was like a real shorthand in friendship and camaraderie. And they're all lovely guys. It felt easy to care.'

'We all felt like fish out of water [at first],' adds Efron. 'Putting on the wardrobe and getting into it. We were all together in that experience.'

'We were all joined in insecurity,' nods White.

'Humbled at the same time,' chuckles Dickinson.

Durkin, naturally, was delighted by what he was witnessing. And somewhat astonished. He'd chosen the actors for what he thought they would bring to the internal character work, and had never once asked them to pile on the pounds of muscle necessary for wrestlers, wary that he'd then be guilty of pushing them in a merciless manner, much as Fritz pushed his sons to be champions. But then…

'We were shooting at the ranch,' Durkin remembers. 'I came back and heard music blasting and Harris, Jeremy and Zac are lifting weights and taking ice baths. Just hanging out. They were like, "Hey. You want in?"'

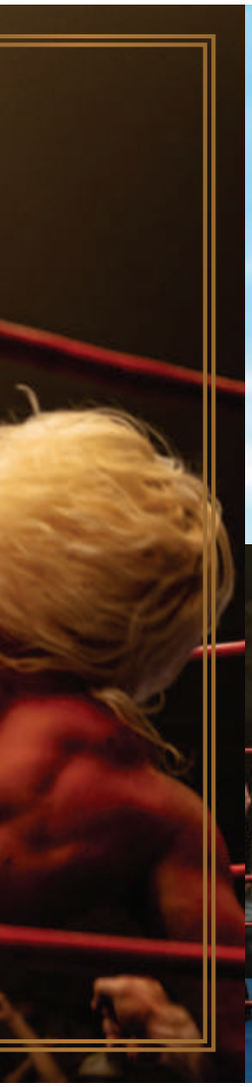
Efron's laugh bounces around the room like a man in a leotard pinging off ropes. 'We were all going hard between takes,' he says. 'Push-ups, ice baths. These guys wanted to get at it. It was fun to be in the ring, because we could one-up each other, and to see somebody crush it was really motivating to get in there and nail it.'

Not that they're saying they got to the level of the guys who do this for a living. So while we've all heard stories of how Robert De Niro could have been a real boxer (*Raging Bull*) or Tom Cruise a genuine pool shark (*The Color of Money*), these actors have too much respect to make such wild claims.

'There was the realisation that we were doing this for four months,' says White. 'Working with guys like Chavo and these other professional wrestlers, you realise just how demanding it is, and how these men we were portraying were on the road 200-days plus a year, and maintaining that physicality.'

'These guys have shows the year round, and the travel life, the tour life,' reiterates Efron. 'Chavo's family are all professional wrestlers. He comes from a long line of pro-wrestling heritage. All of us left this set with tremendous respect for these guys.'

Chavo was on set every day. The more he saw just how much the actors were into it, the more he pushed them. And it was just what they desired, insists Efron. 'We took an extra beating but it was definitely worth it,' he says, his grin as wide as his pecs.



The movie is built on the dynamic of a family going through upheaval

LORDS OF THE RING

Before writing the script, Durkin made a point of not meeting with Kevin Von Erich, who's the lynchpin of the movie, or with any of the extended family. There are, after all, extensive videos out there ('He's an open book, wears his heart on his sleeve,' says Durkin), and the filmmaker didn't want to be in a position where he felt beholden to favour a particular take on the story. Likewise, the actors studied videos to get a handle on accents, mannerisms and more – Dickinson points out there are several sides to the brothers, who naturally behaved differently according to if they were in the ring, in promo mode, or in quieter, more private moments – but avoided any meet-ups.

Durkin did reach out, however, in pre-production, to inform Kevin and the family of his intentions, and everyone finally got to have a group hug after the Dallas premiere in November 2023.

'Meeting Kevin and just being able to sit and talk with him was one of the most gratifying moments of my life,' says Efron. 'I got to see Kevin at this phase of his life, with all of his family, which is a massive family, and in such a happy place. He's almost like a guru. He has this ethereal quality about him. It's beautiful to sit with a guy like that, knowing everything he's been through. I can't put it into words. He's the kind of guy who gives me hope for the future. He loved the movie, and specifically he loved the relationship between the brothers, and when he told me that, it was everything.'

> 'WE TOOK AN EXTRA BEATING, BUT IT WAS DEFINITELY WORTH IT'
> **ZAC EFRON**

The film received an ecstatic reception, and the praise has only snowballed since, with many critics and insiders tipping it for multiple Oscar nominations. Often when the subject of awards buzz is raised in interviews, filmmakers play it down, not wanting to count chickens for fear of having egg on their face. But Durkin openly says that he'd welcome the laurels.

'Of course!' he says. 'I've done my part. A24 has huge belief in this movie, I have huge belief in this movie. Yeah. We want people to see it first and foremost, and whatever happens after that, happens. I feel very proud of it and I'm very excited for people to see it.'

You'll want to be in the front row for this one. It's the main event.

THE IRON CLAW OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 9 FEBRUARY.

INTERVIEW JANE CROWTHER

‘I STILL HAVE THAT FEAR, THAT SENSE OF NEWNESS, THAT CURIOSITY EVERY TIME I START A FILM’

WILLEM DAFOE

One of Hollywood’s finest character actors, who challenges audience expectations with his creations, Willem Dafoe tells *Total Film* how he breathes new life into his roles, including that of a Frankenstein doctor in Yorgos Lanthimos’ awards darling, *Poor Things*. He’s aliiiive...

PORTRAITS CHARLIE GRAY

TRUNK/CHARLIE GRAY

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I always skip onto set,' Willem Dafoe enthuses as he talks about getting back to work after the lengthy SAG-AFTRA actors' strike. 'It's like riding a bike, right?' Certainly it could be assumed that for Dafoe, after four decades of challenging roles, many in era-defining works, emoting is now a muscle memory, easy. Like hopping on a bicycle. A pro who's been on the big screen since his ill-fated 1980 gig on *Heaven's Gate* (he was fired for laughing at a dirty joke on set), Dafoe has turned his hand to Oliver Stone war movies, Scorsese biblical epics, David Lynch crime thrillers, Lars von Trier provocations and superhero tentpoles. But the four-time Oscar-nommed character actor, who now primarily resides in Rome with his film-director wife, Giada Colagrande, disagrees. Chatting to *Total Film* from his Italian home, he looks younger than his 68 years, and his outlook is just as youthful. 'Sometimes I'm happy with myself, and sometimes I think I'm a bum,' he laughs. 'But the one thing I know is that I always show up, and I'm always excited, and I have a good energy. How do you maintain that? By, you know, being with people that have something going on. They need to do something, and you help them do it.'

Dafoe has been helping auteurs achieve their visions since he moved from Wisconsin to New York to join acting troupes and was then lured to movies. He impressed with William Friedkin's *To Live and Die in LA*, a springboard to his empathetic Sergeant Elias in Oliver Stone's war-movie game-changer, *Platoon*. He was nominated for his first Oscar for the performance that brought audiences to their knees just as his character crashed to his, providing the indelible image for the film's poster. He's been Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, an FBI agent investigating KKK killings in *Mississippi Burning*, a Lynchian villain in *Wild at Heart*, a Wes Anderson regular, a Marvel meanie, an oil-swigging lobster fan in *The Lighthouse* and now the nucleus for Yorgos Lanthimos' Frankenstein fever dream, *Poor Things*.

Yes, he's also graced *Body of Evidence*, *Speed 2* and *Mr. Bean's Holiday*, but Dafoe has always bounced back to push the envelope. He's portrayed the good, the bad and the ugly – a diverse practice that he admits keeps him 'open'. 'Different situations, different muscles – that's important,' he says. 'It works against you thinking that there's a particular way to be, or a particular way to problem-solve, or a particular relationship to have with other actors or with performance or with directors or even producers. It cleans you out, and reminds you that the possibilities are endless. And when you have that, that gives you energy.' The process of acting is something spiritual, a praxis that, when undertaken truly with humility, feeds the soul. 'I think there's something about making things and constructing things and considering other ways of being – I think it makes you function better as a person. You're given that proposition of saying, "You know what? If my life was different, I could be this guy."' And if you're Dafoe, you're not playing safe. He grins when his more edgy roles are discussed. 'How do you bend an iron bar?' he muses, with a twinkle in his eye. 'You've got to heat it up first…'

Dafoe's Green Goblin faces off with the hero in 2002's *Spider-Man*

Godwin Baxter in *Poor Things* is another amazing character in an uncompromising film with a visionary director. You've had a career of those. Is that your criteria when you're choosing projects?

Directors have always been very important to me because, with a strong director, I can give myself more freely to someone. I've seen them do things that interest me. I want to be in the room with them. It gives me a purpose. The idea is that I'm there to help them. They're on one side of the camera. I'm the person who does things. I go towards their vision. If that sounds selfless – it's not so selfless [laughs]. It frees you, because going towards something that you don't know always gives you a lot more energy than crafting something that you already know. They're pushing your buttons, and that keeps alive that sense of wonder and play and possibility. It makes your job more of a pleasure. It's a pleasure of having an adventure, and learning something.

What was it about this particular film that made you want to go on this adventure?

Well, to be fair, when you talk about it, it sounds like I choose these directors [laughs]. Of course, that thing about directors is a huge factor, when I do have a choice. But, also, it's often conditioned by them coming to me. So in the case of Yorgos, I knew his work, and I liked it a lot. I was on the interview circuit at the end of the year when they had *The Favourite* and I had *At Eternity's Gate*, so I saw that group that did *The Favourite*. So when Yorgos and Emma [Stone] called me, and they described the story in brief, it was like, 'Of course.' I also was struck – and maybe this is too personal – but it's one of those things that tips your hand. I was in my little office that I have in New York, and behind me is a painting of my father, and next to me is a huge photograph of Marina Abramović doing an autopsy on a woman. So the combination of those two things…

Your father was a surgeon – so was this you being your dad on film?

Well, you know, I grew up more as a custodian, as I was a teenager; a janitor, a cleaning person. I grew up around medical things – surgery, labs, blood and human

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As unorthodox scientist Dr Godwin Baxter in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things*

fluids, that sort of thing. So when they asked me to do it, I knew I wanted to do it. Then I read the beautiful script, and I thought, 'This is fantastic.' I was aware that it had that beautiful hook, that I'd be working with a literal mask, almost, because a huge part of this story is that my character is disfigured. I knew there'd be heavy make-up involved. Sometimes that's a pleasure because it's so much easier to lose yourself when you look in a mirror, and you don't feel yourself, or see yourself. Also, the time in the chair, and preparing, and radically changing your appearance, it really allows you to step into the pretending so much better.

> *'WITH A STRONG DIRECTOR, I CAN GIVE MYSELF MORE FREELY'*

Let's go back to the beginning of your career and your first big movie experience, *Heaven's Gate*. What might you have told that 25-year-old kid walking onto that film set then?
That's a good question. It was a bad experience because I was, sort of by accident, fired from it, and I was a glorified extra. But the time I was there was very exciting, because [director] Michael Cimino was very demanding, and he thought large, and he thought bold, and he was fun to be around when he was making this. We know what happened with *Heaven's Gate* – it got away from him, and then the problems compounded. But, really, that wasn't such a bad experience. It was just embarrassing to be sent back home with my tail between my legs. But I wouldn't do anything differently. You can't apply what you know now to that situation. I still have that fear, and that sense of newness, and that kind of curiosity every time I start a film. I think that's probably my greatest asset. In a funny way, it's a defect, and it makes me feel like a child, because you'd think, with time, I would say, 'Oh, I've got this.' But I never feel that. But it's a defect that has served me well. Because, each time, I have to figure it out. And I like being in that state of insecurity, fear and curiosity. That's such a right place to act in, I think. So that person that was in *Heaven's Gate* – let him hang [laughs]. Maybe he made a mistake, but mistakes are great teachers, right?

***To Live and Die in LA* and *Platoon* came out in quick succession, and really were your calling cards to audiences and the industry. Did it feel like those projects would push the needle for your career at the time?**
Keep in mind that my identity was still very much being a theatre actor, and a downtown theatre actor [with The Wooster Group Theatre Company]. It was my life, and I was very happy to do movies. But I felt very far away from a movie career. That's the truth. I remember being in Hong Kong and I walked down the street and saw my name on a marquee for *To Live and Die in LA*. That's not something I necessarily wished for, and I didn't even know what that meant. But it did mean there was some traction there. And *Platoon* is such a great film. It's one of my favourites. Just an incredible ensemble piece, and to be part of that. Not only was it a pleasure to do and a good film that was both popular and critically embraced, but also it painted a different picture than a lot of people saw [of the Vietnam War], and it helped a lot of vets that came home in shame, and were not respected. That was a time when you saw, in a very concrete way, the healing power of sharing stories.

***Platoon* elicited some controversy, but not as much as *The Last Temptation of Christ*. You must have anticipated controversy with that project…**
Call me stupid, but no. Because I can

ALAMY, SEARCHLIGHT

honestly say, I read that script and I thought it was beautiful. I thought, 'This Christ is a human Christ. It's something that people can relate to. It's a beautiful examination of a spiritual impulse. It's another take on a familiar story.' I really didn't anticipate problems. And, in the end, the problems really were about political positioning, I think. That was a particular period in the US when the religious right needed something to drive their point of view home, and *Last Temptation* was very convenient. And then it morphed into this antisemitic, anti-Hollywood thing. The sad part was, it ruined the release of the movie. Some people thought that it was a provocative movie, and that helped people see it. The truth is, no, it hurt the release.

You reteamed with Scorsese later and you have worked with other auteurs more than once. Does collaborating with an artist you know give you a shorthand or do you start from scratch each time?
I think both, if that's possible. Working with Robert Eggers three times – each time, we get dialled in quicker, and we can go deeper. If you have a good experience, and you like being in the room with them, and there's some sort of understanding, then it makes sense. And someone like Wes Anderson or Paul Schrader that I've worked with many times, or Abel Ferrara – I like being part of the fabric of their work. I like being a character in their long story – not just in an individual film. I think that's fun for an audience, and it's fun for me.

Some of those directors you return to offer raw, uncompromising, challenging work. Is that a lure?
Yes. It's no fun if you don't have a challenge, you know? There are exceptions. But generally you want to have something new happen to you. You want to have an experience. You want to be transformed.

Let's talk about *Mississippi Burning* – do you think that film would be made now? Viewed through a contemporary lens, it's something of a white-saviour story.
I'm many years away from it, but I always felt that was interesting. There's a shift both in my character and in Gene Hackman's character, because their relationship to the situation changes. And I still think it has a lot to say in our current climate. Even if people don't like the positioning of it, what the story is about, and what the issues are, are still incredibly relevant. If art can open up a door to somebody understanding a different part of our world, then it's still a valid film. And it's beautiful.

FIVE STAR TURNS

PLATOON 1986
Dafoe's Sgt. Elias is the conscience of Oliver Stone's Oscar-winning Vietnam War movie. Of his character's iconic death, Dafoe said, 'I detonated my own charges on my body, and I knew where the explosions were on the ground.'

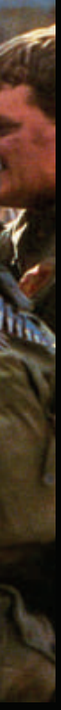
THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST 1988
'[Scorsese] wanted to tell the story from the human side of Jesus,' said Dafoe of the controversial role he describes as his 'most demanding'. When the actor wasn't on set, he was reading the Bible.

SPIDER-MAN 2002
Dafoe had played his fair share of bad guys – notably Bobby Peru in Lynch's *Wild at Heart* – and he aced it as the cackling Green Goblin. He also performed 90% of his own stunts. Surf's up.

THE FLORIDA PROJECT 2017
Seventeen years after his last Oscar nom, for *Shadow of the Vampire*, Dafoe scored with Bobby, the motel manager who shelters a homeless mother and daughter. 'My job was to fit in,' he said of working with non-actors.

THE LIGHTHOUSE 2019
'Yer fond of me lobster, ain't ye?' Dafoe lived in a fisherman's cottage in solitude as he shot Robert Eggers' bonkers tale of two 1890s lighthouse keepers losing their minds. The facial hair is all his own. **JG**

ALAMY, SONY/MARVEL



Let's also talk about 1990, when you worked with John Waters on *Cry-Baby* and David Lynch on *Wild at Heart* in the same year. What did you learn from those experiences?
I knew John for many years and he asked me to do this fun thing in *Cry-Baby*. Also, that's after *Platoon*, so it was one of my first reunions with Johnny [Depp]. I spanked him on the bottom! And Lynch, I had contact with him before when he was doing *Blue Velvet*. I think he was looking at me as a possible back-up for Frank Booth. It wasn't offered to me – let's be clear – but I met him on that. And I thought, 'This guy is special.' *Wild at Heart* was a beautiful script. I liked that character a lot. It played on my imagination, and I had fun playing it. But I didn't break a sweat [laughs]. I didn't do big research or anything. It was all in my imagination, and that was brought up mostly by the costume, the look and, of course, the writing – and, above all, those prosthetic teeth. My only contribution to my look – and this goes back to John Waters – was that little moustache. But other than that, David really held out a costume on a hanger, and said, 'This is your costume. We've got to get you to a dentist.' He wanted me to have this full set of dentures. It was excellent, because I couldn't close my mouth. That opened up a lascivious, nasty kind of part of me that I could access thanks to that physical sensation.

Is that part of your process? Looking for something physical to access your character?
I look for whatever gives me the authority to say, 'I am this guy, and only me.' I take a jump. And to take that jump, you've got to create an experience, or alter your experience, to have special information, or feel like you have something to experience. It's like creating parallel lives. We all are capable of any kind of behaviour, and to bring out certain behaviours, it's just about allowing yourself to connect and find that part of you that can do that thing.

You've played some unpleasant characters – do they get to you? Is it hard to shake them off?
For the most part, you're activated by the camera and the circumstances. I always feel like the circumstances bring the character out. The externals bring the character out. When you drop those, unless you're hanging on to them, they go back within you, kind of to regroup and find their black hole somewhere within you.

'PLATOON IS A GREAT FILM. IT'S ONE OF MY FAVOURITES'

It sounds like we're talking about Green Goblin, doesn't it?
[Laughs] Maybe.

Do you think audience appetite has changed in the time since you've made the Spider-Man films? Is superhero fatigue real?
Audiences have definitely changed, because how we see things, and what we accept as normal, and what we anticipate is always changing. But mostly, the internet and smartphones have changed everybody to the degree that they get involved in those things. It's just crazy. So, of course, now it's much different than the first Spider-Man I did. But superhero fatigue – I don't know. They still keep on making and spinning off superhero movies. There's an audience for it. I think it has to do with the fact that internationally they do very well. The big set-pieces, the broad strokes of some of the morality of it all, and the heart that they try to create in these little moral dilemmas – it's very universal. People can plug in to it all over the world. And since it's a fantasy world, people can enter it on their own terms.

Is it fun to go from a small character piece to a big green-screen blockbuster like *Spider-Man*?
It's fun. I like doing the physical stuff because it's challenging, it's athletic, it's kind of goofy. And then you're dealing with these huge sets, and all these resources. Of course, like anything, the bigger it is, the more cooks you have. The more considerations you have. But I find that even with bigger budgets and bigger movies, they try to be creative in those very corporate moviemaking ventures. So I can't be snotty about it – sometimes you have pasta, sometimes you have sushi.

When you're working with someone like Lars von Trier, what's that energy like?
You know you're jumping off a cliff, but he gives you so many beautiful things to play with. And he's very refined in the actual production elements. It's not that he's just shooting from the hip – he's really well prepared, and he's a very cultured guy. I think the beautiful thing about him is that he has a real knack for speaking the unspeakable. He says the things that nobody allows themselves to say, particularly in *Antichrist*. It was very difficult [to shoot]. He was quite unwell at the time, and very troubled. He would say to Charlotte [Gainsbourg] and me every night, 'I may not be there tomorrow. I may be directing

WILLEM DAFOE IN NUMBERS

4
Oscar nominations to date

146
CREDITS ON IMDb

5
Number of features he's made with Wes Anderson

1980
DATE OF FIRST MOVIE, HEAVEN'S GATE. HE WAS FIRED FOR LAUGHING AT A CREW MEMBER'S JOKE

6
Number of films he's been in that have been nominated for Best Picture Oscar

from the trailer.' He said that every day, and he showed up every day. And he was very present, very prepared every day. He was thrilling to work with, and I know, sometimes, he's his worst enemy. But he loves to… not provoke others. Everybody thinks that's what his deal is. But I think he provokes himself. He tries to figure stuff out, and he's very hard on himself. He doesn't have a reputation for it, but he's a very dear, passionate, caring person.

When people see you in roles like that, many people would describe you as a fearless actor. Do you question some of the places you go to in films like *Antichrist*?

No. Usually, it's an actor's job to give yourself to something. You want to get to that place where you forget yourself. I believe you can do your best work when you don't only follow your agenda, or your taste, or your sense of what you think is correct. I think you have to get out of that. Otherwise, you're just showing off. There's nothing wrong with being an entertainer – an entertainer is a great thing. But I aspire to going beyond entertainment, and really imagining and shifting our thinking. So many of our problems, personally and politically and internationally, have to do with identity, and people being stuck with things that have no relationship to reality. Every time you check in to somebody else's reality; every time you consider another way of being, it gives you the possibility to be more open-hearted and more open-minded. And, with that, you can problem-solve better. You can be kinder. And you can be calmer.

***The Florida Project* was a film that asked for empathy with others and was a critical and awards success. What attracted you to that?**

I love what Sean Baker does. He goes some place, and he embeds himself in that place, and lives in that place, and learns how to tell that story through the people that are there. And that is exactly what happened in *The Florida Project*. We shot in an actual place, and it was really those people there that taught us how to tell the story. Because you can't make a bullshit story if you're living with them, and we basically were. The beautiful thing for me is also dealing with non-actors. I tried not to be an actor. I tried to remove that stink of being an actor [laughs], and tried to be a good manager of a hotel. It's not really a Method thing; it's doing the things that they do, and to not spin it. Be there for it. Know how those people really live. So you

slipstream in their lives, and you try to remain true to what you're saying.

We mentioned Robert Eggers earlier – your first experience working with him was *The Lighthouse*. Did you and Robert Pattinson push each other creatively?
I don't necessarily like any kind of built-in conflict. Some people encourage that. I'm not sure that works. But at the same time, the times where I've been involved in casting people around me, I've never wanted to do it. I don't want to choose my partners. I want to be handed a partner, and to deal with it. Because I think when you choose your partners, and you feel too comfortable, maybe you won't get pushed, you won't find something out. So maybe a little tension is good, but I don't think you should invent that, you know? And in the case of *The Lighthouse*, that was just practical. I didn't really know Robert, and then, in the end, we got along very well. But we had different ways of working, and that actually helped because it helped to create the difference in the generation of the characters, and the different ways that they lived their lives. Plus, the way that we were shooting, it was so miserable that we barely talked to each other, you know? You go to get warm, and you go to survive, because we were really out in the elements. And then you do the scene.

You've just finished filming *Nosferatu* with Eggers, having appeared in *Shadow of the Vampire* previously. Was part of the attraction to look at that story from a different angle?
They're so different, I don't even make the connection. I've made more than one vampire movie, you know? The look and the intention are very different. I think Robert and [cinematographer] Jarin [Blaschke] were in a very good place, and he's getting more and more refined. It's a bigger scale – maybe not quite as big as *The Northman*, but he

With Charlotte Gainsbourg in provocative Lars von Trier horror *Antichrist*

> *'LARS VON TRIER WAS THRILLING TO WORK WITH'*

was very on top of it. I just saw some pieces, and I didn't get a sense of the film itself, but it was just beautifully photographed. I can't think of another film that quite looks like it.

You also appear in Olmo Schnabel's *Pet Shop Days*. You've worked with his father, but is it important to support young filmmakers coming through?
It's not so much, 'Oh, I'm going to help him.' He can help me, too. I really mean that. I think when people work for a while, they really have to be careful of a certain kind of corruption. As you get further down the line, and you've had more experiences, something can harden in you. When you work with younger people, or people that are just starting, there's an excitement, and there's a sense that you can return to it with them. There's some older directors that really struggle because they've seen better days, and they think, 'Wow, it's so hard to make a movie now. It used to be so much more fun.' No names, but that's a real reality in older people. I don't want to be an actor in that way.

And then there's *Beetlejuice 2*…
Listen, Tim Burton, when you think about the movies he's done, he has contributed so much, and many of his movies are fantastic. I was very pleased that he asked me to do something in that. And something that was fun, and not a bullshit cameo or something. Something that was substantial.

You're so prolific and your projects are so varied. Are you looking for something you haven't done yet or do you make choices based on whatever sets you on fire at the time?
I think so – the latter. You don't know what you need until you get there. You do smell things out. You do try to make certain things happen. But I always feel like perhaps it's why I'm not a director. If I see something too clearly, or I want too badly to share it, it's complete. It's done, a little bit. I'm always looking for the part that I don't know. I like to collaborate. I don't like the full responsibility of knowing what stuff means [laughs]. I enjoy being there. I'm a good soldier, but no general…

POOR THINGS IS IN CINEMAS 12 JANUARY.

WILLEM DAFOE LINE READING

'I LOVE THIS PLACE AT NIGHT. THE STARS. THERE'S NO RIGHT OR WRONG IN THEM. THEY'RE JUST THERE.'
SGT. ELIAS PLATOON

'I'll tear your fuckin' heart out, girl!'
BOBBY PERU WILD AT HEART

'OH. THE SCRIPT GIRL. I'LL EAT HER LATER.'
MAX SCHRECK SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE

TRUNK/CHARLIE GRAY, ALAMY

EDITED BY
MATTHEW LEYLAND
@TOTALFILM_MATTL

★★★★★
YOUR NEW FAVOURITE

★★★★☆
IT'D BE CRUELLA TO MISS IT

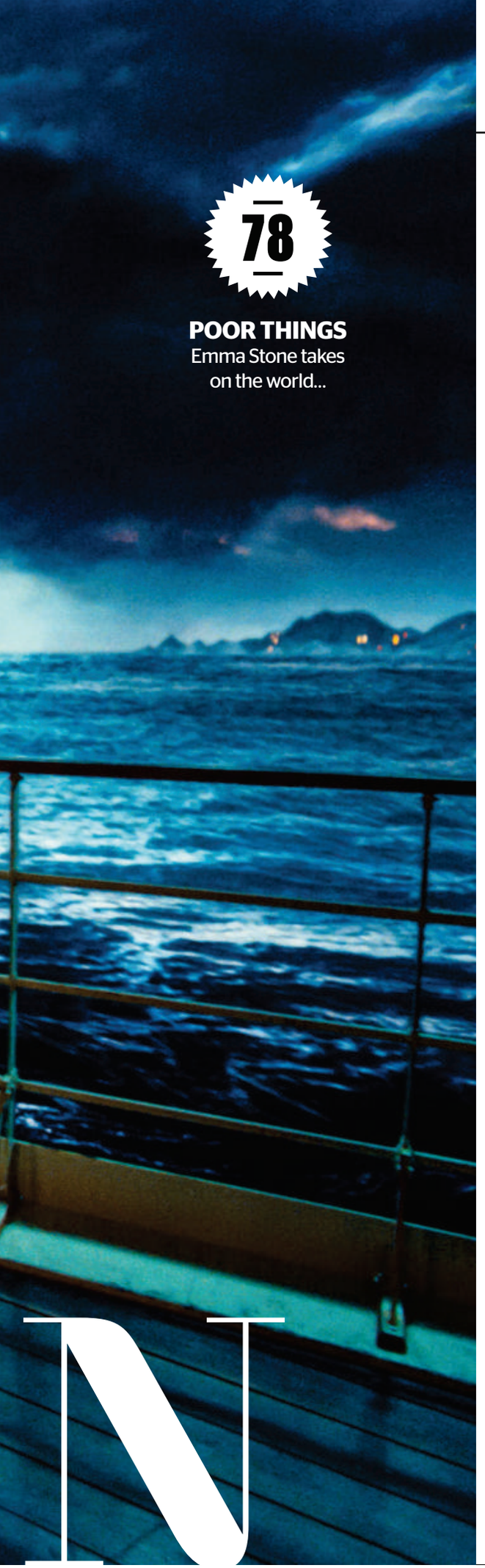
★★★☆☆
CROOD BUT EFFECTIVE

★★☆☆☆
GOES A BIT LA LA

★☆☆☆☆
NOT SO AMAZING

SCREE

THE WORLD'S MOST TRUSTED MOVIE



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POOR THINGS
Emma Stone takes on the world...

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ALSO RELEASED

We couldn't see them in time for this issue, so head to gamesradar.com/totalfilm for reviews of the following:

TITLE	RELEASE DATE
Anyone But You	Out now
Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom	Out now
Mean Girls	17 January
Night Swim	5 January

For more reviews visit gamesradar.com/totalfilm

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POOR THINGS TBC

Project rebirth...

★★★★★ **OUT 12 JANUARY** CINEMAS

DIRECTOR Yorgos Lanthimos **STARRING** Emma Stone, Mark Ruffalo, Willem Dafoe, Ramy Youssef, Jerrod Carmichael **SCREENPLAY** Tony McNamara **DISTRIBUTOR** Searchlight **RUNNING TIME** 141 mins

SEE THIS IF YOU LIKED

METROPOLIS 1927
Fritz Lang's aesthetic finds echoes in *PT*'s world, with its reanimated women and wondrous mechanised architecture.

WEIRD SCIENCE 1985
Bear with us: men make a woman designed as a toy. Woman confounds, causes chaos and refuses to be contained.

THE FAVOURITE 2018
Feisty Emma Stone – check. Reimagined time period – check. Nailed-on awards botherer – definitely check.

For more reviews visit gamesradar.com/totalfilm

Yorgos Lanthimos and Emma Stone's second collaboration mirrors 2018 awards darling *The Favourite*, inasmuch as it's another feminist period dramedy charting the emancipatory journey of a girl of little means. But *Poor Things* isn't as concerned with the chess-playing and wit that women use to survive. A steampunk, gender-flipped *Frankenstein* of sorts, it explores and challenges the way society dictates and stifles female behaviour. Lanthimos also tackles our own prurience and the seemingly monstrous concept of a woman without shame.

The film opens with Victorian doctor Godwin Baxter (Willem Dafoe) in the midst of medical experimentation, to the admiration of student Max McCandles (Ramy Youssef). Tony McNamara's screenplay (based on Alasdair Gray's 1992 novel) tracks what happens when Baxter invites his acolyte home to help socialise his latest project, a reanimated suicide victim he names Bella (Stone).

Living in a house teeming with zoological grafts (pigs with goose heads, ducks with dog noggins and a father figure she calls by his diminutive, 'God', Bella may look like a grown-up, but her development is childlike. A naif who must learn walking, speech and social conditioning from scratch, she's taught by McCandles not to punch strangers, spit out food she dislikes or exhibit her body.

But then McCandles' moral opposite arrives in the form of predatory lawyer Duncan Wedderburn (Mark Ruffalo), who uses Bella's voracious hunger and naivety to sate his own appetites. Once Bella has used her 'hairy business' for sex, she becomes eager to escape the confines of 'God', prompting a globetrotting journey of self-discovery...

Boasting Lanthimos' off-kilter trademarks (fish-eye lensing, unconventional framing, switches from rich black-and-white to saturated colour), *Poor Things* is a riot. McNamara's (*The Favourite*, *Cruella*) screenplay is littered with laughs and quotable dialogue. Jerskin Fendrix's score is rife with queasy distortion while Holly Waddington's non-conformist costumes are gorgeously weird and surgical (Bella wears a cape that's practically prophylactic, her puffed sleeves recalling internal organs).

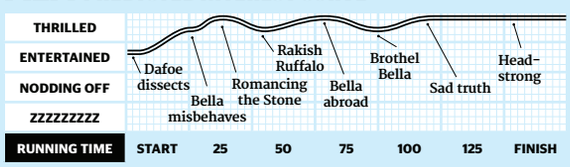
But, as with *The Favourite*, selling this heightened world comes down to performance. Stone aces a cut-glass English accent, as well as the evolution of a woman who goes from being a rapacious consumer of experience (booze, sex, cakes, dancing...) to someone who lives on her own terms, sets her own moral code and determines her place within society. Though the latter tries to subject Bella to the male gaze, she resists via her inability to feel humiliation or shame. She approaches fashion, sex, conscience and charity all in the same way: whatever works for her.

With a cascade of black hair framing her pale face and her body often exposed, the character could – in the hands of a lesser actor – elicit audience pity, or conjure a disquieting sense of exploitation. But thanks to Stone's determined jaw, comedic timing and physical dexterity (her frenzied dancing and drunken tottering are Keaton-level masterful), the joke is always turned on the men who seek to harness Bella.

The patriarchal ciphers she's up against also entertain. Dafoe – all daddy issues and great balloon-producing burps – is well at home in his role, while Ruffalo brings a sleazy, selfish rage (and fruity, wandering accent) to his usual playful screen presence. Youssef and Jerrod Carmichael are pleasant distractions, but the star of the show (in every way) is always Stone, in a performance that pushes both her, and us, way beyond any comfort zone. **JANE CROWTHER**

THE VERDICT A funny, sad, bawdy, beautiful concoction that will haunt and provoke in equal measure.

TOTAL FILM PREDICTED INTEREST CURVE™



'What do you mean, it looks like I'm wearing a shower curtain? This is haute couture!'

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SEARCHLIGHT

Stars Kane Robinson (Izi) and Jedaiah Bannerman (Benji)

SEE THIS IF YOU LIKED

PAPER MOON 1973
Kaluuya cites Peter Bogdanovich's pic as an inspo for *The Kitchen*'s father-child relationship.

BLADE RUNNER 2049 2017
Denis Villeneuve's replicant sequel arguably boasts modern cinema's most awesome dystopia.

IF THE STREETS WERE ON FIRE 2022
Some of *The Kitchen*'s daredevil bicyclists were previously seen in this vibrant documentary.

For more reviews visit gamesradar.com/totalfilm

THE KITCHEN 15

London falling...

★★★★★ **OUT 19 JANUARY** NETFLIX

Recent years have seen Oscar winner Daniel Kaluuya voicing the Ghost of Christmas Past in a film of *A Christmas Carol* and playing Bill Sikes in an audiobook of *Oliver Twist*. It's perhaps not surprising, then, that there are aspects of both in the script he co-wrote (with Joe Murtagh) for *The Kitchen*, in which a Scrooge-like curmudgeon vies with a Fagin-esque gang leader for the allegiance of an orphan who's fallen on, ahem, hard times.

But there the Dickens parallels end, replaced by shades of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley: writers whose dystopian depictions of futuristic societies get a vivid complement in the bleak vision of 2040 London that Kaluuya and co-helmer Kibwe Tavares have created for their directorial feature debug.

DIRECTORS Daniel Kaluuya, Kibwe Tavares **STARRING** Kane Robinson, Jedaiah Bannerman, Henry Lawfull **SCREENPLAY** Daniel Kaluuya, Joe Murtagh **DISTRIBUTOR** Warner Bros. **RUNNING TIME** 107 mins

In the metropolis to come, gleaming apartment blocks in the sky offer a life of antiseptic isolation to those who can afford it. Those who can't have 'The Kitchen': a decaying commune of higgledy-piggledy social housing whose proud residents live in poverty under relentless government surveillance.

Having had enough of police raids and water shortages, Izi (Kane Robinson) has his eyes set on a one-bed apartment in swanky Buena Vida. Just when he thinks he's out, however, something pulls him back in: youthful Benji (Jedaiah Bannerman), an ex-girlfriend's kid who, having lost his mum, is in danger of being drawn into the violent insurgency that local Robin Hood Staples (Hope Ikpoku Jnr.) is waging against the authorities.

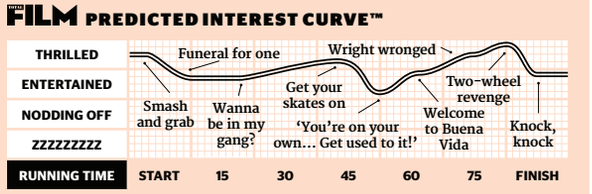
It's a straightforward morality story at heart, reminiscent at times of *A Bronx Tale* and with a sagacious neighbourhood DJ (Lord Kitchener, played, rather fabulously, by former footballer Ian Wright) cut from the same cloth as Samuel L. Jackson's Mister Señor Love Daddy in *Do the Right Thing*. Yet it is such a stunningly and meticulously designed film that it continually captivates. Tavares draws on his background as an architect to show both the sterility of gentrification and the glorious dysfunction of that which it would eradicate.

One inspired flourish sees London's brutalist Barbican Centre become a high-tech funeral home, while other scenes in The Kitchen find an ingenious new use for the shuttered HMP Holloway. In Robinson, meanwhile, we surely have tomorrow's leading man, the *Top Boy* star exuding a potent charisma in a film that could potentially do to his career what *Get Out* did for Kaluuya's. **NEIL SMITH**

THE VERDICT A startling vision of the future that's troublingly close to our present, with an affecting human story at its core.

NETFLIX, WARNER BROS.

TOTAL FILM PREDICTED INTEREST CURVE™



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THE BOYS IN THE BOAT 12A

When the rowing gets tough...

★★★★★ **OUT 12 JANUARY** CINEMAS

George Clooney follows up *The Tender Bar* (2021) with another unabashed heartwarmer, a solid but fairly predictable old-school sports biopic celebrating a scrappy US university rowing eight who powered to the 1936 Olympics against all the odds.

Adapted from Daniel James Brown's bestseller, this real-life underdog story zeroes in on Callum Turner's proud but penniless Depression-era student Joe Rantz, who desperately battles for a crew place just for the free lodging. Director Clooney's sweaty close-ups of the crew's back-breaking training adroitly emphasise the teamwork that gruff coach Al Ulbrickson (Joel Edgerton) instils into his argumentative recruits, who combat their hard times with inspiringly hard work.

Too bad, then, that Mark L. Smith's taciturn script (it's a manly movie, set in a stiff-upper-lip era) is too understated to get you really rooting, *Seabiscuit*-style, for the raw but exceptional crew when they try to trounce their rich-boy rivals. Still, rowing races are notoriously hard to infuse with tension on film (see 1996 megaflop *True Blue*); by moving snappily between drone shots, screaming crowds and tendon-straining rowers, Clooney manages to generate some water-whipping excitement.

Any attempt at *Chariots of Fire*-style emotional intensity is tanked, however, by Callum Turner's unhelpfully laconic, low-key performance. He's effortlessly overshadowed by a brooding turn from Jack Mulhern (*Mare of Easttown*) as the boat's enigmatic lead oarsman. **KATE STABLES**

THE VERDICT Clooney steers his well-made, old-fashioned sports drama with style and skill. But it's never quite oar-some.

Which country do you think they're from? Answers on a postcard please...

Flamboyant singer Shug Avery (Taraji P. Henson) sashays into Celie's life

THE COLOR PURPLE TBC

From page to stage to screen...

★★★★★ **OUT 26 JANUARY** CINEMAS

This latest adaptation of Alice Walker's Pulitzer-winning tale of an African-American girl's coming of age in early 20th-century Georgia takes its cue not from the 1985 Spielberg movie but the noughties Broadway musical. Making her screen debut, Fantasia Barrino reprises her stage role as the abused Celie, whose only respite comes from her bond with sister Nettie (radiant *Little Mermaid* star Halle Bailey).

Celie is handed over to cruel farmer Mister (Colman Domingo) to care for his home and ungrateful brood, but a lifeline arrives in the form of jazz singer Shug Avery (Taraji P. Henson). Although Mister is infatuated with Shug, she's the one who helps set Celine on the path to sexual and spiritual empowerment.

Despite its cast's myriad talents, Blitz Bazawule's movie proves less impactful than its forerunners. Boasting spectacular choreography, it's an utter feast for the eyes. But there's often a disconnect between its harrowing subject matter and upbeat song-and-dance numbers. The chemistry between Barrino and Henson is lacking, but Danielle Brooks is formidable as Celie's daughter-in-law Sofia (a role that previously bagged producer Oprah Winfrey an Oscar nod). Meanwhile, the third act sees a series of redemption arcs come together in an overly neat way; the film treads a fine line between saccharine and crowd-pleasing, though there's no doubt that a few moments will elicit tears. **LEILA LATIF**

THE VERDICT Walking a tough tonal tightrope, this musical adap suffers wobbles but is handsomely shot and performed.

ALL OF US STRANGERS TBC

Great Scott...

★★★★★ **OUT 26 JANUARY** CINEMAS

SEE THIS IF YOU LIKED

WEEKEND 2011
Haigh's ability to convey intimacy – and intricacy – in relationships first grabbed attention here.

FLEABAG S2 2019
Laughter, tears and hotness with an awards-bothering Andrew Scott.

AFTERSUN 2022
Paul Mescal in another haunting, evocative Brit-flick fusing past and present.

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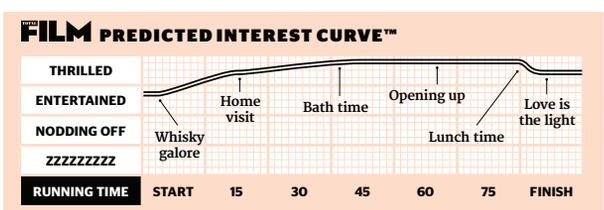
Perhaps one of the reasons *Back to the Future* has endured – besides being an expertly calibrated adventure with a charismatic lead, iconic imagery and clockwork-perfect script – is its endlessly fascinating concept of meeting your own parents at the same age as you. Andrew Haigh's *All of Us Strangers* also explores that idea, though there are no flux capacitors or Enchantment Under the Sea dances here.

Loosely based on Japanese novelist Taichi Yamada's *Strangers* (1987), Haigh's adap is initially set in present-day London. But the high-concept hook sees the protagonist travelling back to his childhood home, only to interact with his parents, who – if you've got a torch to hold under your chin, now's the time – died decades earlier, when he was just a kid. That may sound like the start of a tale told at a sleepover, but this isn't a ghost story in that sense. Though haunting and tense in places, this is not a chiller. The ghosts are of the past, the demons personal.

Writer/director Haigh works in the same naturalistic register that made his 2011 breakout *Weekend* so refreshingly disarming. He also brings several layers of specificity that really add depth. Screenwriter Adam (Andrew Scott) is living in a new-build London high-rise. It's as yet barely occupied, save for mysterious younger guy Harry (Paul Mescal), who's also living in one of the new apartments. A chance meeting ignites a spark between the two gay men, but Adam is hesitant to rush into anything.



As their relationship slowly takes shape, Adam, researching his latest project, heads to the suburban commuter town he grew up in and finds his parents home. Played by Claire Foy and Jamie Bell, they're relics of their time, but not caricatures. Given they both died before Adam came out, there's a lot to unpack. *All of Us Strangers* is extremely sharp on changing attitudes and generational differences – not just between Adam and his parents, but also between Adam and the younger Harry (Adam can't quite embrace the term 'queer', given how it was used in his formative years).

Both narrative strands are equally compelling. Scott – best known to date for *Sherlock* and *Fleabag* – fully delivers on his role's promise. It's all the more impressive a showcase given that he's so restrained, his vulnerability nuanced. Even in the more heightened emotional moments, there's never a shred of look-at-me self-consciousness. It's hard not to imagine that supporting roles might become rarer for Mescal, given his current ascent, but as in 2021's *The Lost Daughter*, he proves to be a valuable secondary player. Charming, mysterious and tender as the story demands, he's magnetic, and his chemistry with Scott resonates.

DIRECTOR Andrew Haigh **STARRING** Andrew Scott, Paul Mescal, Claire Foy, Jamie Bell **SCREENPLAY** Andrew Haigh **DISTRIBUTOR** Searchlight/Disney **RUNNING TIME** 105 mins

SEARCHLIGHT/DISNEY

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Right time: Adam (Andrew Scott) meets mysterious Harry (Paul Mescal)

Foy and Bell also do great work as Adam's out-of-time parents. Some of their attitudes are dated, sometimes to an upsetting degree, but they remain human and warm. Despite the incongruous age difference (or lack thereof) between them and their son, their interactions feel natural and believable. Their meetings also lead to some extremely charged moments, when Adam gets to do what so many never get the chance to, and rake over unresolved parent-child issues with the benefit of hindsight.

The central conceit has an air of magic realism. It's all presented rather matter-of-factly – at least at first, until Adam's grasp on reality begins to feel somewhat tenuous, and his life starts to look like a waking nightmare. Haigh handles these tonal shifts deftly. From the gobsmacking opening shot of a London sunset, you feel like you're in extremely safe hands. It's easy to get lost in this world, and like Adam, you never want the visits back home to end. There's also a superb use of 80s pop throughout, serving as a time capsule in itself.

'The central conceit has an air of magic realism. It's presented rather matter-of-factly, until Adam's grasp on reality begins to feel somewhat tenuous'

It's impressive how this puzzle box wraps up. It's satisfying, emotional and bold, without undercutting what has come before. Even if you sense where it might be heading early on, it's no less rewarding for that. Told with economy, and evading any easy genre classification – it's part romance, part fantasy, part thriller, and more besides – it's a very moving piece of work, and a testament to the power of love.

MATT MAYTUM

THE VERDICT Andrew Haigh stuns with a hard-to-categorise drama that's both fantastical and engagingly grounded. Ace performances all round.

THIS BLESSED PLOT 15

★★☆☆☆ **OUT 26 JANUARY**
CINEMAS

When Chinese filmmaker Lori (Yingge Lori Yang) comes to stay in Thaxted, Essex, she's drawn into the lives of the local townspeople: both the living and the dead. As well as uncovering familial secrets, she communes with several ghosts, offering an outsider's perspective on parochial English life. Despite exploring interesting ideas about faith and socialism, this docudrama from writer/director Marc Isaacs (2020's *The Filmmaker's House*) sadly underwhelms. From production values to non-professional performances, it has the feel of a village am-dram show. **TIM COLEMAN**

JACKDAW 15

★★★☆☆ **OUT 26 JANUARY**
CINEMAS

A full-throttle thriller, this debut from British director Jamie Childs sees desperate, double-crossed army veteran Jack (Oliver Jackson-Cohen) hunting for his kidnapped brother (Leon Harrop) through the industrial badlands of the North East. Crammed with white-knuckle motocross chases and crunchy shotgun-toting fights, it rocks a nice *Drive*-in-County-Durham vibe… until, that is, the story skids into soapy melodrama and starts to sputter. Still, Jackson-Cohen's taut, taciturn performance, finding vulnerability under Jack's violence, proves he can handle action-hero duties with aplomb. **KATE STABLES**

SAMSARA U

★★★★☆ **OUT 26 JANUARY**
CINEMAS

The word 'documentary' doesn't quite do justice to this transportive cinematic experience from Galician filmmaker Lois Patiño. Taking its title from the Buddhist concept of life being a cycle of birth/death/rebirth, it begins in a dreamily lensed rural Laos, where a teenager is reading extracts from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to an ailing elderly woman. Patiño proceeds to chart no less than the reincarnation of the latter's soul. Particularly audacious is a 15-minute bridging sequence where the viewer is encouraged to experience the diverse sounds and flashing images behind closed eyes. No peeking! **TOM DAWSON**

WERNER HERZOG: RADICAL DREAMER 15

★★★☆☆ **OUT 19 JAN** CINEMAS
19 FEB BD, BFI PLAYER

Thomas von Steinaecker's documentary takes us on a whistlestop tour of the legendary filmmaker's greatest hits. Beginning with a very Herzogian 'Based on a true story', it whizzes us from the director's humble beginnings in rural Bavaria through chaotic classics such as 1972's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* to gonzo documentaries such as 2005's *Grizzly Man*. At 96 minutes it only digs so deep, but offers a diverse range of contributors: Christian Bale, Wim Wenders, Carl Weathers and more pay homage to a self-confessed 'good soldier of cinema'. **MATT GLASBY**

She always overpacked for camping holidays

THE END WE START FROM TBC

Flood, sweat and tears…

★★★★☆ **OUT 19 JANUARY** CINEMAS

Climate change knows no borders. Yet it's still a shock to see London become its latest victim in Mahalia Belo's apocalyptic drama, where rising flood waters send residents out of the capital in an increasingly desperate search for sustenance and shelter.

Among the affected is an unnamed woman (played by Jodie Comer) who's had a baby with her partner (Joel Fry) just as the world starts to crumble around her. The man's mum and dad (Nina Sosanya, Mark Strong) offer an immediate safe haven, yet when that too is compromised they head further north – first to a government-run encampment where only Comer's character and her baby are admitted, and from there to a commune in the Orkneys where friendship with another young mother (Katherine Waterston) supplies fleeting respite from their stark new reality.

Adapted by Alice Birch from Megan Hunter's novel, *The End We Start From* eschews epic FX in favour of an intimate, close-up immediacy. There's a rueful matter-of-factness to how things disintegrate so rapidly, while Fry's inability to cope under pressure resonantly suggests it will be the women who'll do the rebuilding in whatever grim future awaits us.

A brief cameo from producer Benedict Cumberbatch provides some mid-film star wattage. Yet who needs it when you have Comer, a force of nature to rival any city-swamping deluge? **NEIL SMITH**

THE VERDICT A mum's survival instincts face an incredible test in this mournful but powerful end-of-the-world parable.

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THE SACRIFICE GAME TBC

★★★★★ **OUT NOW** SHUDDER

From shocking opening to twisty climax, this period horror from Jenn Wexler (2018's *The Ranger*) is a class act. Christmas Eve, 1971: misfit pupils Samantha (Madison Baines) and Clara (Georgia Acken) and their teacher Rose (Chloë Levine) are stuck at boarding school over the holidays when a murderous, Manson-like cult headed by Jude (Mena Massoud) and former student Maisie (Olivia Scott Welch) breaks in. What follows riffs on familiar home-invasion themes, but Wexler and Sean Redlitz's excellent script conjures laughs and bursts of poignancy amid all the bloodletting. **MATT GLASBY**

FREAKS VS THE REICH 15

★★★★★ **OUT 12 JANUARY** CINEMAS

Writer/director Gabriele Mainetti nods to the Fantastic Four and Fellini with his ambitious but meandering wartime epic. It's WW2, and clairvoyant Franz (Franz Rogowski) wants to force a quartet of superpowered circus stars to help Germany and prevent Hitler's death. The troupe, however, have other ideas. Mainetti assembles impressive effects and strong leads, notably Aurora Giovinazzo as tormented Matilde, but his handling is otherwise loose: slow pacing dilutes the thrills, while the choppy tone lacks – say – Guillermo del Toro's sensitive facility for historical fantasy. **KEVIN HARLEY**

Someone definitely got the memo about the colour scheme

SCALA!!! 18

Cult cinema...

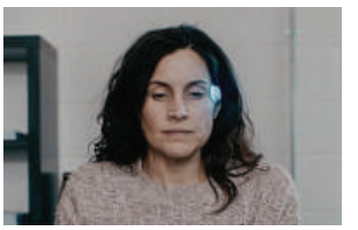
★★★★★ **OUT 5 JANUARY** CINEMAS **22 JANUARY** BD, BFI PLAYER

There aren't many independent picturehouses you could convincingly build a documentary around, but London's Scala repertory cinema is the exception. When it took up its residence in King's Cross in 1981, after a spell in Fitzrovia, it created a halcyon haven for film buffs to get their fix of cult cinema from around the world. Film journalist Ali Catterall and his co-director Jane Giles, the former booker at the Scala, clearly come from a place of love for the venue.

Among the roster of talking heads, *Pink Flamingos*' John Waters recalls taking his late star Divine to the Scala, which he memorably describes as 'a country club for criminals and lunatics and people that were high'. Other celeb contributors include filmmakers Ben Wheatley and Mary Harron and comedian Adam Buxton, although the better stories come from those who worked there – including one usher who accidentally pulled a sleeping man's (prosthetic) arm off after a marathon movie sesh.

While the film is good on the Scala's place in the cultural and political landscape of 80s Britain, it's a shame it doesn't dig deeper into the venue's demise, which came after Giles played Kubrick's then-withdrawn *A Clockwork Orange* and faced legal action. Yet with animation further lending a DIY feel, *Scala!!!* is still an entertaining guide to this grungy but fondly remembered picture palace. **JAMES MOTTRAM**

THE VERDICT A good-natured, nostalgic wallow in a bygone cinematic era, ably put together by Catterall and Giles.



BLANK 15

★★★★★ **OUT 8 JAN** DIGITAL

Novelist Claire (Rachel Shelley) signs up for a fully AI-operated retreat in a bid to shift her writer's block. But when a virus infiltrates her unit's software the system glitches, leaving her locked inside with an increasingly unstable android called Rita (Heida Reed). Can Claire resolve her IT issues and escape? Brit director Natalie Kennedy's debut plays like a mash-up of *M3GAN*, *Misery* and *Black Mirror*, though what might have made a tight 45-minute TV episode feels somewhat stretched at feature length. Reed and Shelley are solid throughout, however, and the last act satisfies. **TIM COLEMAN**

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SHERE HITE TBC

★★★★★ **OUT 12 JANUARY** CINEMAS

Why did feminist sex researcher and academic Shere Hite fall off the radar? The answers ring out clearly from this fascinating, thoughtful and revealing doc by Nicole Newnham. Huge in the 70s, Hite broke ground by discussing women's sexual pleasure and publishing her rigorous research in *The Hite Report*. Men got so freaked, watching their butt-hurt responses here is enough to make you think *Anchorman* was a documentary. While it's no surprise Hite 'disappeared', Newnham restores her rep to stress how vital her work was – and still is. **KEVIN HARLEY**

BFI, CURZON, DAZZLER MEDIA, DOGWOOF, SHUDDER, SIGNATURE, SPARKY PICTURES, VERTIGO, VERVE

REBEL MOON – PART ONE: A CHILD OF FIRE 15

Emergency insurgency...

★★★☆☆ **OUT NOW** NETFLIX

Zack Snyder doesn't do things by halves, but even by his standards, part one of his long-gestating space saga is a thunderous slab of mythological sci-fantasy. This epic re-do of *Seven Samurai* takes a standard 'getting the band together' scenario and elevates it to operatic heights.

Anthony Hopkins' voiceover establishes the *Rebel Moon* universe, which has been plunged into discord by the slaying of a benevolent king. Asserting their authority, the forces of the Motherworld demand that the farmers of peace-loving satellite Veldt surrender their harvest. What nasty Admiral Noble (Ed Skrein) doesn't know is that runaway warrior Kora (Sofia Boutella) isn't about to let her new pals get picked on.

Kora sets off across the galaxy to find a posse of freelance fighters who'll repel Noble's next visit: a ragtag team of mercenaries who are each introduced with an elaborate set-piece. It all ends with a dramatic reversal that brings things to an explosive if inconclusive conclusion – the inevitable price of *A Child of Fire* being a scene-setter for part two (*The Scargiver*). But fans of Snyder's heightened brand of filmmaking won't be left wanting, and if the performances rarely extend beyond two-dimensional archetypes, there's still fun to be had with Charlie Hunnam's wily, Han Solo-esque pilot. **NEIL SMITH**

THE VERDICT Snyder's passion project risks being subsumed by self-importance, but delivers no end of bombastic mayhem.

Sofia Boutella leads Zack Snyder's sci-fi ensemble

Sales of pink velvet frock coats are going to *skyrocket*

WONKA PG

Sheer Willy power...

★★★★☆ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

In Paul King's (*Paddington*) Dahl-iverse confection, Willy Wonka (Timothée Chalamet) is a young man with a crazy dream, hungry to share his bespoke chocolate creations with the world's candy capital. Our guileless fantasist clashes with chocolate-cartel boss Slugworth (Paterson Joseph) and winds up reduced to forced labour. Yet as Wonka befriends fellow outcasts, including orphan Noodle (Calah Lane), he clings to his vision.

Resisting Wilder/Depp mimicry, Chalamet whisks up his own gentle Wonka from a measured mix of naivete and knowing wiles. Some will complain he's too benign, too warm, but he summons a musical-ready lightness and bonds generously with the winning Lane.

The vibrant stylings are equally on-point, accommodating hints of playful whimsy and Wizarding World-ish world-building to maintain a sense of handmade personality. The tunes are buoyant and infectious, with composer Joby Talbot and songwriter Neil 'Divine Comedy' Hannon elevating story beats into expressive musical extravagances. True, *Wonka* threatens to OD on its own supply of Brit stars near the climax; momentum dips as King strains to juggle cast members. But as Wonka and Noodle take flight, companionship and compassion emerge as *Paddington*-esque themes, mixed with loving care. If you could use some anti-cynical uplift, you'll be eating out of King's hand. **KEVIN HARLEY**

THE VERDICT King brings his *Padding*-touch to Dahl, lacing a melodious pick-you-up with heart. It gets busy, but the cast, songs and spirit soar.

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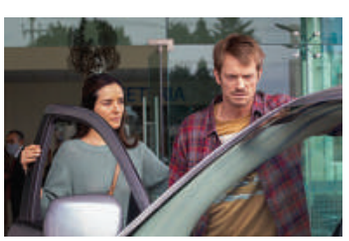
THE GOLDFINGER 15

★★★☆☆ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

Twenty-plus years after facing off in *Infernal Affairs*, Hong Kong superstars Tony Leung and Andy Lau return as implacable adversaries in this white-collar crime epic from writer/director Felix Chong (*Affairs*' co-scripter). Set in HK during the 1970s and 80s, it adheres to a familiar rise-and-fall template, following the chairman (Leung) of a conglomerate as he's investigated by an anti-corruption officer (Lau) in the wake of a stock-market collapse. There are shades of Scorsese's *Wolf of Wall Street* in the impressively choreographed displays of hedonism, but the storytelling proves overly frenetic.

TOM DAWSON



SILENT NIGHT TBC

★★★☆☆ **OUT NOW** SKY CINEMA/NOW

Hong Kong action maestro John Woo's first Holly-movie since 2003's *Paycheck* is a shoot-'em-up sans dialogue (bar a spot of police radio). Electrician Brian's (Joel Kinnaman) son is killed by gangbangers who also put a bullet in his throat, leaving him, literally, speechless. Woo ladles on the maudlin sentiment before Brian turns from sad dad into buff punisher, with a little help from YouTube (no, really). It takes its time setting things up, but when our hero starts dispatching gang members over the course of one bloody Christmas Eve, it becomes a grimly entertaining gunfest.

NIGEL PIZEY

DAZZLER MEDIA, MIRACLE, NETFLIX, SKY, SONY, TRINITY CINEASIA, WARNER BROS.

No one tell them how this story ends...

THE BOOK OF CLARENCE TBC

He's not the Messiah...

★★★☆☆ **OUT 19 JANUARY** CINEMAS

The Hollywood Biblical epic was always ripe for parody – and so it came to pass in the classic likes of *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. Four decades on, writer/director Jeymes Samuel (*The Harder They Fall*) has another stab at pricking the genre's pomposity, with amusing but muddled results.

It's certainly great fun watching Jerusalem deadbeat Clarence (LaKeith Stanfield) try to dodge a gambling debt by attempting to become Jesus' 13th apostle, and when that fails, setting out his stall as a messianic miracle-worker. It's clear, meanwhile, that Samuel is having a ball himself crafting a hip new spin on Roman Judea: one in which Shisha pipes turn their users into floating stoners and a chariot race occurs on the same Matera thoroughfare seen in *No Time to Die*.

But around halfway, anarchic gusto gives way to po-faced reverence as Clarence gains both a conscience and, confusingly, preternatural powers. A Da Vinci-esque Last Supper is milked for laughs, while a mass crucifixion is played bloodily straight – a puzzling tonal blend that calls into question the cohesion of the film's intentions.

Stanfield, on double duty as both Clarence and his straitlaced disciple twin Thomas, is a charismatic lead in a cast that boasts more than one enjoyable cameo. Yet you can't help feeling that Samuel's laudable ambition to give his mischievous comedy a deeper resonance was too heavy a cross to bear. **NEIL SMITH**

THE VERDICT An inclusive riposte to Gospel truth that ultimately loses the courage of its satirical convictions.

FOREVER YOUNG TBC

★★★★☆ **OUT 26 JANUARY** CINEMAS

Ageing novelist Robyn (Diana Quick) is full of regret, so when she's offered a serum that will return her to being 20 again, she jumps at the chance. Issues arise, however, when Robyn's rewind begins to impact on her relationship with husband Oscar (*LotR*'s Bernard Hill), who is more philosophical than his wife (now played by Amy Tyger) about growing old. What could have been a twee sci-fi morality tale instead emerges as an elegant meditation on morality, thanks to writer/director Henk Pretorius' poignant, pointed script and sterling performances, particularly from Hill. **TIM COLEMAN**

PADRE PIO 15

★★☆☆☆ **OUT 26 JANUARY** CINEMAS

Controversial filmmaker Abel Ferrara casts controversial actor Shia LaBeouf in this unconventional biopic about revered Italian priest Padre Pio, which makes for challenging but ultimately unrewarding viewing. It's set in the aftermath of World War One; as young soldiers return home, LaBeouf's Pio experiences torturous visions that force him to confront past sins. The spectacle of LaBeouf self-flagellating over previous behaviour is certain to raise eyebrows, but the rest of the film simply isn't interesting enough to keep this from being a punishing watch, in every sense.

MATT LOOKER

Angus and Mary are less than thrilled by Paul's idea for Christmas

THE HOLDOVERS 15

Laughing through the Payne...

★★★★★ **OUT 19 JANUARY** CINEMAS

Rebounding from the muted reception to 2017's *Downsizing*, Alexander Payne goes back to basics with his latest comedy drama. Set in the 1970s, *The Holdovers* sees strict Classics professor Paul Hunham (Paul Giamatti) stuck at a New England boarding school over Christmas on babysitting duty, supervising students who are unable to return home during the holidays. One particularly rebellious student, Angus (Dominic Sessa), is giving him grief, but sure enough the pair soon connect.

Yes, it's a familiar story that riffs on undeniable cliches, but that doesn't prevent it from being a triumph. Arguably Payne's best since the Oscar-winning *Sideways*, it thrives upon the writer/director's reunion with that film's leading man. Giamatti's Paul is a man of tradition in every sense of the word, frustrating colleagues with his refusal to adapt to modern school politics.

Viewers might also find the character exasperating, were it not for Giamatti's delicate performance; there's an immediate warmth to him. Though he continually dismisses his students with unique insults such as 'hormonal vulgarians', you can't help feeling that, deep down, Mr. Hunham does care about the boys of Barton Academy. Beneath the bravado are several vulnerabilities, which Giamatti slowly reveals as we grow closer to his reserved character.

The film's other protagonists are responsible for Paul coming out of his shell, notably student Angus (newcomer Sessa) and cafeteria manager Mary (Da'Vine Joy Randolph). Despite this being his screen debut, Sessa seems more than comfortable going toe-to-toe with Giamatti; his performance is superb. Like Paul, Angus is also in emotional pain, but chooses to cover it up with an abundance of swagger. He too could have been an off-putting character, but Sessa's charm renders him endearing.

Though the film ostensibly centres on the dynamic between Angus and Paul, it's arguably Mary who is the beating heart of *The Holdovers*. Mourning the loss of her son, who was a student at the school, Mary chooses to stay there over Christmas to feel close to him. However, she doesn't want any pity, only letting her grief show after several drinks at a Christmas party as her son's favourite record plays: a heartbreaking scene that has 'awards-show clip' written all over it.

There's something comforting and soothing about watching these three strangers become a found family, despite their differences and difficulties. *The Holdovers* is a loving testament to the power of the human spirit, albeit one that favours subtle, melancholic grace notes over any need to shout.

EMILY MURRAY

THE VERDICT Alexander Payne doesn't put a foot wrong with a charming comedy drama that finds him on *Sideways*-rivalling form.

DIRECTOR Alexander Payne **STARRING** Paul Giamatti, Da'Vine Joy Randolph, Dominic Sessa, Carrie Preston, Brady Hepner **SCREENPLAY** David Hemingson **DISTRIBUTOR** Universal **RUNNING TIME** 133 mins

SEE THIS IF YOU LIKED

SIDEWAYS 2004
How will *The Holdovers* measure up to the Oscar success (five noms, one win) of Payne/Giamatti's earlier gem?

FRED CLAUS 2007
Somewhat broader than *The Holdovers*, but still a Giamatti-led Christmas-com.

DOLEMITE IS MY NAME 2019
Da'Vine Joy Randolph's turn left such a strong impression on Payne that he asked for her by name when casting Mary.

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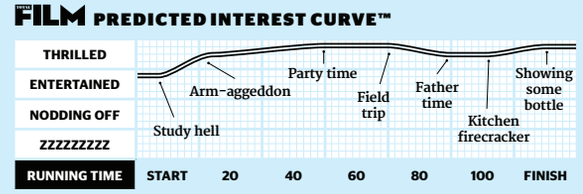

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DAYS OF HEAVEN 12A

Malick's magic hour-and-a-half...

1978 ★★★★★ **OUT 2 FEBRUARY** CINEMAS

As with his 1973 debut *Badlands*, Terrence Malick's astonishing sophomore feature is narrated by a teenage girl, the action filtered through her perceptions. In *Badlands*, Sissy Spacek's Holly views events like they were straight out of the trashy celebrity magazines she pours over. In *Days of Heaven*, Linda Manz's Linda has been beaten down by a hardscrabble life, her emotions muted.

She tells of the days before the Great War, as she and her elder brother Bill (Richard Gere) and his lover Abby (Brooke Adams) flee Chicago for Texas to work as labourers in vast wheatfields. Overhearing that the farmer (Sam Shepard) is ill, Bill plots that Abby should seduce him and become his wife, so that she might inherit his fortune. But fate ravages their plans as surely as locusts descend to raze the wheat…

Maintaining an elegiac tone that never sways into sensationalism or sentimentality, this mythic drama frames its players within nature in all of its vast beauty and indifference – a theme that Malick has returned to repeatedly. Shot largely in the magic hour of dawn and dusk, its cinematography is some of the most luminous ever lensed. Néstor Almendros won an Oscar for his work, though Haskell Wexler, the legendary DoP who's here credited with 'additional photography', claims he shot half the footage. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT If ever a film deserved a 4K cinema rerelease... Malick's masterpiece continues to inspire awe.

Heaven sent: Richard Gere and Brooke Adams in Terrence Malick's masterpiece

Chucky with 'Bride of Chucky' Tiffany: such a handsome couple...

PARAMOUNT, ARROW

THE CHUCKY COLLECTION 18

All dolled up...

1988-2022 ★★★★★ **OUT NOW** BD, 4K UHD

EXTRAS ★★★★★ Commentaries, Documentary, Featurettes, Deleted scenes, Galleries, Storyboards, Booklet, Posters

From *Dead of Night* (1945) to last year's *M3GAN*, deadly dolls have enjoyed a long history on the silver screen. None, however, has had quite so big an impact as Chucky, the 'Good Guy' doll possessed by the soul of serial killer Charles Lee Ray (Brad Dourif).

Making his debut in 1988's *Child's Play*, the diminutive plastic sadist quickly became a favourite with fright fans thanks to Dourif's gleefully malevolent vocal performance. But even then, who could have guessed that Chucky would still be slicing bodies and cracking wise so long after Freddy Krueger last hung up his glove?

Credit here goes to series writer Don Mancini who, following the disappointingly rote *Child's Play 3* (1991), bounced back with *Bride of Chucky* (1998). That Ronny Yu-directed hit not only introduced Dourif's fellow franchise MVP Jennifer Tilly, but launched the series on an increasingly playful path that embraced the set-up's inherent absurdity while exploring ideas far beyond the scope of your typical slasher.

A spectacular celebration of the horror franchise, this boxset boasts stunning 4K presentations of all six sequels – but is hamstrung by only offering the original *Child's Play* on 1080p Blu-ray. Extras are plentiful: archival goodies bolstered with new interviews and the unexpectedly touching 2022 documentary *Living with Chucky*. **ANTON VAN BEEK**

THE VERDICT The lack of the original in 4K is frustrating, but otherwise this set is a playtime treat for fans.

CARRIE 18

Moving stuff...

1976 ★★★★★ **OUT 22 JANUARY** 4K UHD

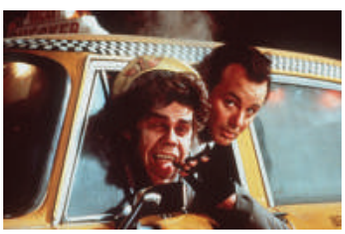
EXTRAS ★★★★★ Commentary, Featurettes, Visual essay, Alt TV opening, Gallery, Booklet, Poster, Postcards

It's hard to believe now, but *Carrie* almost ended up in Stephen King's rubbish bin. Instead, his wife Tabitha saved the pages and convinced him to keep writing. It became a smash hit – as did Brian De Palma's Oscar-nominated adaptation. Re-released in glorious 4K almost 50 years after the fact, the film retains its power.

Like many of King's strongest works, it's a tale of child abuse. At its centre is telekinetic teen Carrie (Sissy Spacek) who's tormented at home by her religious mother (the late Piper Laurie), taunted at school by the other kids, then horribly pranked at the prom – at which point all hell breaks loose. De Palma's stylistic flourishes intensify the suffering, Pino Donaggio's lush score adds a sense of doomed romance, and the talented young cast – including Amy Irving, William Katt, Nancy Allen and, in his first major role, John Travolta – really sell the drama.

But this is Spacek's film. Allowing slivers of hope to show, heartbreakingly, through the damage, she's incredible. Her commitment to the role shines through on the extras, whether she's auditioning in character with grease in her hair, or getting buried alive to play Carrie's hand for the *Deliverance*-inspired sucker-punch ending. This gorgeous package also includes a 40-page booklet, double-sided postcards and more. You'll be glad once again that Tabitha intervened. **MATT GLASBY**

THE VERDICT Getting the treatment it fully deserves, the first Stephen King adaptation remains one of the very best.

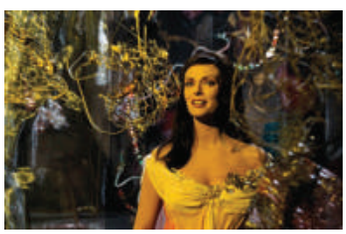


SCROOGED 12

1988 ★★★☆☆ **OUT NOW** 4K UHD

EXTRAS ★★★☆☆ Commentary, Featurettes

There have been countless memorable screen versions of Dickens' festive miser, but only one we can think of who gets kicked in the balls by a Christmas spirit. And boy, does he deserve it. Bill Murray's TV exec Frank Cross is such a misanthrope he makes other cine-Scrooges look like Tiny Tim. He's the cruel, shouty core of Richard Donner's uneven but marvellously mean-spirited Yuletide comedy, which adds a dollop of *Network*-style showbiz satire to *A Christmas Carol*. A cracker of a film for all real-life Grinches. Donner's commentary is the plum extra. **ANTON VAN BEEK**



BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE PG

1963 ★★★★☆ **OUT NOW** BD, DIGITAL, BFI PLAYER

EXTRAS ★★★☆☆ Featurettes, Stills gallery, Booklet

Three years after the reactions to *Peeping Tom* effectively ended his career, Michael Powell made another serial-killer film for West German TV. An adaptation of Béla Bartók's expressionist opera, it sees Norman Foster and Ana Raquel Satre ratcheting up the warbles as they glide from room to room. Unavailable for years but now with a 60th-anniversary restoration, *Bluebeard's Castle* is a revelation, sure to make you swoon with its tracking shots, vivid colours and Hein Heckroth's dazzling production design. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

TRADING PLACES 15

1983 ★★★★☆ **OUT NOW** 4K UHD

EXTRAS ★★☆☆☆ Featurettes, Deleted scene

John Landis' *Pygmalion*-esque comedy stars Dan Aykroyd as a commodities trader and Eddie Murphy as a street hustler whose lives are swapped as part of an elaborate bet about nature versus nurture. While some aspects haven't aged well, for the most part this is a LOL-filled update of the sort of social comedies Preston Sturges was making five decades earlier (*Sullivan's Travels*, et al). In other words, bawdy comic brilliance that might just teach you something about the human condition. Extras are mostly old material, aside from a brief new Landis chat. **ANTON VAN BEEK**

THE ENIGMA OF KASPAR HAUSER PG

1974 ★★★★★ **OUT 19 JANUARY** CINEMAS

A 50th-anniversary big-screen rerelease for one of Werner Herzog's best films. Set in a Bavarian town and the surrounding countryside in the late 1820s, this richly allegorical fable of innocence lost centres on Kaspar (played by real-life Berlin street musician Bruno S.), a young man who has spent the first 16 years of his life locked in a cellar without human contact. Scenes of society's efforts to 'civilise' this Christ-like outsider are endowed with a rare acuity – yet it's the mysterious dream sequences that truly showcase the director's visionary capabilities. **TOM DAWSON**

ARROW, PARAMOUNT, BFI

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EXTRAS

TOY/COLLECTIBLE

LEGO DUNE ORNITHOPTER

OUT 1 FEBRUARY

If the extended wait for *Dune: Part Two* has got you in a flap, here is the time-killer you've been looking for: a buildable replica of House Atreides' Royal Ornithopter. Part of the Lego Icons range (ie, way too good for kids), the 1,369-brick set nails the vehicle's dragonfly-derived design, with functional blades that fold out and retract. Spicy touches include a generous eight minifigures, from Paul to Chani to Baron Harkonnen in a robe as long as your living room. Make a landing at lego.com.

APPAREL/MAKE-UP

PRISCILLA COLLECTION

OUT NOW

Off to see Sofia Coppola's biopic of Mrs. Presley? Make heads turn as you rock ('n' roll) up to the cinema sporting Priscilla's winged-eye look, thanks to Half Magic's limited-edition set, which includes mascara, eyeliner and the Wing Magician reusable wing guide. There's also a range of tie-in togs, from embroidered crewnecks to rhinestoned T-shirts. Complete the look with a J. Hannah silk-ribboned silver heart-shaped locket. Fix your peepers on shop.a24films.com.

COLLECTIBLE

SPIDER-MAN POP! COVER

OUT NOW

This year marks the 40th year since the debut of Spidey's black cossie – which turned out to be a deadly alien symbiote who slunk off to bond with Eddie Brock, creating Venom. Talk about a wardrobe malfunction… Funko's collectible commemorates the symbi-suit's first appearance in *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue 252, whose dashing cover is the backdrop to a 12.1cm vinyl bobblehead of nu-Spidey. Get kitted out at funkoeurope.com.

LEGO, FUNKO, NUMSKULL, A24, HALF MAGIC

COLLECTIBLES

TUBBZ PLUSHIES/ MINI TUBBZ

OUT NOW

The collecti-bills market just got bigger with two new breeds of cosplaying duck. Coming in at 50% smaller than standard-sized TUBBZ (but arguably twice as cute), Mini TUBBZ are available in six varieties: The Grinch, Sonic, Stay Puft, Minion Bob, Minion Stuart and the shark from *Jaws*. Bruce is also part of the TUBBZ Plushies range, alongside Spielberg stablemate the T-rex, Optimus Prime, characters from *Destiny* and, slightly late/super-early for Christmas, Santa Claus. Dive into numskull.com. **MATTHEW LEYLAND**

G7 summits were far more interesting back in the day

CLASSIC TV

BABYLON 5

A space-station odyssey...

1993-98 AVAILABLE ON DVD, BD, DIGITAL

Light years ahead of anything else on television!' declared the publicity for the fourth season of science-fiction series *Babylon 5*. For once, it wasn't hyperbole. Series creator J. Michael Straczynski's 90s space opera did more than just break *Star Trek*'s stranglehold on small-screen sci-fi. Its groundbreaking approach to serialised storytelling arguably set US TV drama on a creative path that would ultimately lead to everything from *Mad Men* to the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica*.

Set in the 23rd century, *Babylon 5* centres on the titular five-mile space station, a place of intergalactic diplomacy and home to an array of alien species. An interstellar UN if you like or, as Straczynski pitched it to TV networks, '*Casablanca* in space'. Over the course of the show's five seasons, this relatively unassuming location would become the lynchpin in a battle for the fate of the entire universe, an epic story of good and evil played out between God-like beings. Allegiances were forged and broken. Characters loved and lost. And every story beat was thought out years in advance.

When it came to planning *Babylon 5*, Straczynski set down a five-year roadmap for the show, one that would take a more novelistic approach to its storytelling, threading ongoing story arcs through every episode. To that end, while nearly half of the show's debut season would be written by hired hands, by the second season it was down to just seven episodes. After that, Straczynski only stepped away from the word processor one more time, letting superstar writer Neil Gaiman contribute a story to the fifth season. In total, Straczynski wrote 92 of *Babylon 5*'s 110 episodes, an astonishing feat that granted him near-total freedom to tell his story his way.

If *Babylon 5*'s modest budget meant the production couldn't always keep pace with Straczynski's epic vision, the pioneering use of digital effects meant that any brief moments of spectacle were rather mind-blowing at the time. Meanwhile, the show's established character actors (Claudia Christian, Bruce Boxleitner, Michael O'Hare, Mira Furlan) did a terrific job of overcoming most of the weaknesses in Straczynski's dialogue and occasional shortfalls in production design, bringing real humanity to even the most otherworldly characters.

Although the series came to an end in 1998, *Babylon 5* lives on in the form of multimedia spin-offs (this year's animated movie *The Road Home* being the latest) and in all the other arc-based US TV dramas to which it opened the door. **ANTON VAN BEEK**

A VERY SPECIAL EPISODE

SEVERED DREAMS
S3, 1996

As the Shadow War heats up, Babylon 5's secession from the Earth Alliance leads to a tense and shocking military stand-off. This enthralling episode deservedly beat cinematic big hitters *Star Trek: First Contact* and *Independence Day* to win the 1997 Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation.

ALAMY, WARNER BROS.

SOUNDTRACKS

THIS IS SPINAL TAP

Ten classics from the kings of Brit-metal idiocy...

(LISTEN TO THE) FLOWER PEOPLE
Before metal, Tap were trippy peaceniks. Featuring guitarist Nigel Tufnel's electric sitar, this dainty ditty bottles half-baked hippy optimism beautifully. 'It's about a movement,' says singer David St. Hubbins. 'Without a good movement, it's hard to get your day started.'

JAZZ ODYSSEY
Convinced that jazz musicians needed showing how it's done, pipe-blowing bassist Derek Smalls forged Tap's 'new direction' from his bass runs. 'It's an escapade up and down the neck,' he says. Fans simply sought the nearest escape route.

GIMME SOME MONEY
Pitched between The Beatles and The Who, Tap's British Invasion throwback is scarily accurate. Homage, parody – such a fine line. Don't mistake the lyrics for metaphor: Tap just wanted money, 'pound notes, loose change, bad checks, anything'.

HELL HOLE
Tufnel has the blues in a reflection on his modest upbringing, a moral tale in which success is overrated. As Nige mopes over fame's backstage buffets, he misses his impoverished past. 'I'm flashing back into my pan,' goes the killer pay-off.

HEAVY DUTY
With an intro demanding air-drumming participation, Tap's AC/DC-ish stomper equates rock with pain. 'Great rock'n'roll should hurt,' Hubbins opines, wisely. Duly, Tufnel brings the torment with his take on Boccherini's *Minuet*, goosing rock-classical pretension gloriously.

SEX FARM
A funny thing happened to Tufnel driving through the Midlands. 'We saw a sex farm,' he says. 'It's something that exists.' It does in song, as Hubbins milks every known – and some unknown – farmyard/intercourse metaphor in the lyrics. Cover Shaun the Sheep's ears.

BIG BOTTOM
Queen or Kiss parody? Either way, Tap's butt-rock tribute is all about that bass. 'People love hearing low sounds,' says Tufnel. As proof, Tap maxed the bottom end at Live Earth 2007 with an army of bassists. Don't leave this behind.

ROCK AND ROLL CREATION
With a riff culled from Black Sabbath, Tap's creation-myth anthem is, sayeth Hubbins, 'an attempt to touch, or at least rub, the face of God'. The magisterially pretentious riff and prog mid-section nail metal's amateur dramatics to the mast.

STONEHENGE
From dawn to Donington, metal fans have long contemplated the druidic magic of 'Stone'enge'. Size issues about the stage model aside, Tap's prog epic is a precision-tooled tribute to rock's immersion in Brit-folk mystery, torn from the Zep/Sabs songbook.

TONIGHT I'M GONNA ROCK YOU TONIGHT
Tap's show opener is the band at its most direct and, indeed, informative. 'It's saying intent,' says Hubbins. 'This,' adds Tufnel, 'is what's going to happen.' Their after-rock song remains unwritten but who knows? A 40th-anniversary sequel could bump this Tap 10 up to 11. **KEVIN HARLEY**

Marty DiBergi and Nigel Tufnel: discussing the meaning of life, probably

STUDIOCANAL, SONY MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT, DISNEY

FRESH SPINS

Mild at heart and weird on top...

WISH
★★★☆☆
Should Disney have wished a little harder? While *Encanto*'s tunes brimmed with zip, the uniformly pleasant songs here need more *We Don't Talk About Bruno*-esque pep and punch. *This Wish*'s pop charms lack Lin-Manuel Miranda's light-up-the-sky dazzle; *I'm a Star* and villain song *This is the Thanks I Get?!* are vaporous. Chris Pine and Ariana DeBose duet sweetly on *At All Costs*, but otherwise only the percussive *Knowing What I Know Now* drums up the verve and gusto that *Wish* so clearly yearns for.

POOR THINGS
★★★★☆
British experimentalist Jerskin Fendrix approaches his intoxicatingly lush debut score like someone discovering film music anew. Tinkly and innocent, canted and weird, Fendrix's skewed punk symphonies mismatch instruments – drunken squeezebox, piercing strings, breathy pipe organs – instinctively, showing delicious disregard for convention. Sometimes the score resembles a monster movie gone rogue, sometimes Mica Levi (*Under the Skin*) at play. Sometimes it's a tad over-skittish, too, but Fendrix binds his strands beautifully for the warped, wonderful end-credits crescendo.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

OUT 18 JANUARY PC, PS4/5, SWITCH, XBOX ONE/SERIES X/S

With the perpetually delayed remake of 20-year-old classic *The Sands of Time* (the game that inspired the Jake Gyllenhaal-starring adap) still MIA, Ubisoft is hoping this fast-paced side-scroller will prove a capable substitute. It's best thought of as a *Metroid Dread*-like reimagining of the series' early adventures, with agile young warrior Sargon leaping and carving his way through a cursed city en route to rescuing the kidnapped prince. It combines traversal with combat to thrilling effect: Sargon's acrobatic skills allow him to effortlessly flow from fight to flight and back again.

GAMES PREVIEW

Eight games for your 2024 wish list...

THE ALTERS

OUT TBC 2024 PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X/S

We've all imagined potential futures for ourselves, if we'd made different choices. But what if you were forced to confront all the versions of yourself you could have been? That's the fascinating question posed by this cerebral sci-fi strategy game from *Frostpunk* developer 11 Bit Studios. Loosely inspired by Duncan Jones' *Moon*, it sees space miner Jan Dolski clone himself to survive on a desolate satellite. With each clone imprinted with distinct memories and personality traits, Jan faces a struggle keeping his various selves happy as they work to escape a greater threat: an imminent sunrise that threatens to scorch all life on the planet's surface.

LORELEI AND THE LASER EYES

OUT EARLY 2024 PC, SWITCH

Between *Year Walk*, *Device 6* and *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, the back catalogue of enigmatic Swedish duo Simogo is already festooned with gems – so it's doubly exciting to hear industry whispers suggesting the studio's next might be its finest hour yet. Inspired by Alain Resnais' Nouvelle Vague classic *Last Year at Marienbad*, this puzzling adventure follows a mysterious woman as she explores a baroque mansion. It's simple to get into, yet purposely opaque: straightforward controls mean you can play with one hand, the suggestion being that you'll need the other free to scribble down notes and solve the riddles that await within.

UBISOFT, SEGA, WARNER BROS. GAMES, PARADOX, SEGA, ANNAPURNA, 11 BIT STUDIOS

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S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

OUT TBC 2024 PC, XBOX SERIES X/S

This long-awaited successor to 2009's *Call of Pripyat* has suffered setbacks that would cause most studios to give up, even before Russia's invasion of its homeland forced developer GSC Game World to relocate from Kyiv to Prague. Despite some of its staff joining Ukraine's armed forces and a string of cyberattacks over the past two years, GSC remains undaunted, and plans to finally launch its first-person horror sequel in the next few months. As in the original, it's a challenge to survive, though you sense the odds won't be quite so heavily stacked against the player as they have been for its maker.

LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH

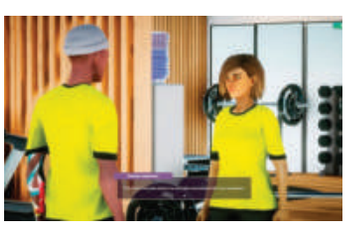
OUT 26 JANUARY PC, PS4/5, XBOX ONE/SERIES X/S

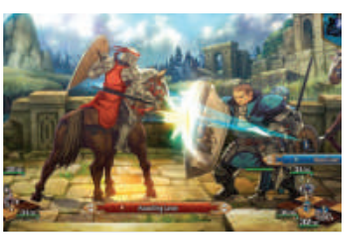
Overseas fans of this series once faced a long wait between releases; now it's a challenge to keep up. Following hard on the heels of spin-off *The Man Who Erased His Name*, this welcomes the return of Ichiban Kasuga *and* the protagonist he replaced, as the action moves from Japan to Hawaii. After two unlikely comebacks, a terminal cancer diagnosis suggests this might actually be the end for the stoic Kazuma Kiryu. But he's not going down without a fight: his special ability allows him to ignore the strictures of the turn-based battle system to go toe-to-toe with opponents.

LIFE BY YOU

OUT 5 MARCH PC

Former *Sims* head Rod Humble is aiming to not-so-humbly beat the series he used to oversee at its own game. There's no denying that Paradox Interactive's life sim is built upon similar foundations to its perennially popular inspiration, but it looks and sounds less cartoonish – no gibberish exchanges or exaggerated gestures here – and promises a greater degree of control over your avatar and their virtual world, from personal interests to furniture designs. Character attributes and environmental factors combine for more dynamic, reactive storytelling; you'll be able to take control of your character during their more mundane moments, too.





UNICORN OVERLORD

OUT 8 MARCH PS4/5, SWITCH, XBOX SERIES X/S

After dabbling in sci-fi with the wildly ambitious *13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim*, Vanillaware retreats to a more familiar fantasy setting with this typically handsome tactical role-player. As a banished prince, you'll gather allies – from elves to creatures to celestial beings – to form an army in the hope of reclaiming your kingdom from a roguish general. Cue turn-based battles that borrow from the likes of *Triangle Strategy* and *Fire Emblem*, while benefiting from Vanillaware's visual flair: the studio's hand-painted characters and stop-motion animation techniques lend considerable style to these close-quarters skirmishes.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

OUT 2 FEBRUARY PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X/S

That Rocksteady's action-adventure is set five years after the events of the nine-year-old *Batman: Arkham Knight* speaks to its troubled development; the departure of co-founders Sefton Hill and Jamie Walker ring further alarm bells. Recent footage has failed to quieten the doubters – its expansive open-world Metropolis is a reminder of the game's origins as a solo Superman game. But you should never bet against Task Force X, as Harley Quinn, King Shark, Deadshot and Captain Boomerang team up to stop the eponymous heroes who have been brainwashed by supervillain Brainiac. Beleaguered, or in a league of its own? We'll know soon enough… **CHRIS SCHILLING**

2 MORE

From master filmmaker to Master Planner...

THE PATH TO PARADISE

★★★★☆

In his 70s pomp, Francis Ford Coppola was a god-like visionary who, via personal fiefdom American Zoetrope, sought nothing less than a creative, communal utopia. Sam Wasson's successor to his *Chinatown*-inspired *The Big Goodbye* charts the crumbling of that dream, the draining trials of *Apocalypse Now* serving as an appetiser to the fiasco of *One from the Heart*. For Wasson, Coppola's life is a 'colossal project of experimental self-creation'. Fitting, then, that it ends with *Megalopolis*, a 40-year passion project now finally nearing completion.

NEIL SMITH

SPIDER-MAN VOL.2: 1965-1966

★★★★★

It's easy to forget just how pioneering Peter Parker was when he first swung into comic books. The idea of a teenage superhero who lived with his aunt, got bullied at school and was rubbish at romance was revolutionary, as Jonathan Ross notes in his intro. The stories were pretty special, too: Taschen's lavish (if pricey) reprint of *The Amazing Spider-Man* issues 20-38 covers the latter half of Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's seminal run. Among the gems is the three-part Master Planner saga (the one where Spidey's trapped for several agonising pages under heavy machinery).

TIM COLEMAN

'So what exactly are the side effects of snorting the white stuff, Tony?'

BOOKS

SAY HELLO TO MY LITTLE FRIEND: A CENTURY OF SCARFACE

★★★★☆ **NAT SEGALOFF** CITADEL

Recently marking its 40th anniversary, Brian De Palma's opus is now rightly revered as a gangster-movie great. But, as Nat Segaloff's spirited tome recalls, its hostile reception in 1983 had the director fearing the worst at the opening-night party: 'I thought they were going to skin me alive.' Prefacing the film's cultural renaissance, Segaloff asks, 'When would Brian De Palma be able to utter one of the biggest "I told you so"s in Hollywood history?'

If such lapses into hyperbole serve as a reminder of Segaloff's past as a publicist, his passionate prose is in keeping with the film's excesses. And it's tempered by impressive critical rigour and a flair for contextual colour. Digressions cover everything from Hollywood's fixation on the Mob to the influence of the Borgias on the incestuous relationship between Al Pacino's Tony Montana and his sister Gina (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio). The movie's controversial depiction of Cubans also comes under scrutiny.

Due consideration is paid, of course, to Howard Hawks' 1932 original. Segaloff spotlights the similarities between the two: both featured heavily reshot finales, while De Palma's run-ins with the MPAA mirrored the way Hawks' film fell afoul of the restrictive Hays Code. Offering several such revelations, this is a fine way to mark a century (well, near enough) of *Scarface*. **CHRIS SCHILLING**

HARRY DEAN STANTON: HOLLYWOOD'S ZEN REBEL

★★★★☆

JOSEPH B. ATKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

In the first biography of the late actor, veteran writer Atkins champions Stanton as a singular voice in American cinema. Charting his early years in Kentucky and fractious relationship with his parents, through to his time in the Navy and roles in *Cool Hand Luke*, *Alien*, *Repo Man* and *Lucky*, what emerges is an affectionate portrait of Stanton as artist, philosopher and punk hero. **TIM COLEMAN**

BLACK TV

★★★★☆

BETHONIE BUTLER
BLACK DOG & LEVENTHAL

Journalist Butler curates a comprehensive and celebratory guide to 50 years of Black storytelling on the small screen. Opening with influential sitcom *Julia*, Butler traces a path through the 60s and 70s – a time of unprecedented representation – to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and other Black-led comedies of the 90s and beyond. Fully decked out with on-set photos and production stills, this vibrant tribute to a host of groundbreaking Black talent is long overdue. **JOEL HARLEY**

THE GOLDEN SCREEN

★★★★☆

JEFF YANG BLACK DOG & LEVENTHAL

Spanning more than 100 years, this coffee-table tome charts the rise of Asian American representation on the silver screen. With a foreword by Michelle Yeoh, plus interviews with other big names (Daniel Kwan, Simu Liu, John Cho…), it offers a wide-ranging history of cinematic depictions, both positive and problematic. Yang also celebrates the stand-outs – including hits like *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Everything, Everywhere...* that have brought Asian stories to the mainstream. **TIM COLEMAN**

BLACK DOG & LEVENTHAL, CITADEL, FABER & FABER, TASCHEN, UNIVERSAL, UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

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TOTAL FILM

BUFF

CINEMA CELEBRATED AND DEBA ED. BOOS MOVIE GENI SUPER RO LEVELS...

IS IT BOLLOCKS?

Film Buff investigates the facts behind outlandish movie plots.

THIS MONTH NAPOLEON

Q In Ridley Scott's *Napoleon*, Josephine seduced Bonaparte with her 'wares', talking about her prodigious gifts. Did Josephine really chat about her lady garden with Boney?

In Scott's film, Vanessa Kirby's Josephine instructs Napoleon (Joaquin Phoenix) to look up her skirts between her legs when they meet. 'If you look down you'll see a surprise,' she promises saucily. 'Once you see it, you will always want it.' A survivor of the Reign of Terror, scandalous socialite Marie Josèphe was pursued aggressively by Napoleon and he married her in 1796. The leader set off for war in Italy and sent letters to his wife from the front, referring fondly to her private parts as 'the little black forest' and writing that 'to live in Josephine is to live in the Elysian fields'. Steady on, fella. The military leader also wrote of yearning to please his lover, hungering for 'a kiss on your heart, and one much lower down. Much lower…' Bonaparte also begged his missus not to bathe as he was intoxicated by her body odour, and penned booty-call letters to her: 'How happy I would be if I could assist you at your undressing, the little firm white breast, the adorable face, the hair tied up in a scarf a la creole.' His oversharing was used by the British for ridicule when Bonaparte's fading feelings about Josephine as she cheated on him were written about in UK newspapers, but the leader remained enamoured – at his death on Saint Helena in 1821, long after the couple had divorced, the funny-hat wearer's last word was allegedly 'Josephine'.

VERDICT NOT BOLLOCKS

ALTERNATIVE BOX OFFICE

The biggest movies… STARRING TARAJI P. HENSON

01	**MINIONS: THE RISE OF GRU** 2022	$939.6M
02	**RALPH BREAKS THE INTERNET** 2018	$529.3M
03	**THE KARATE KID** 2010	$359.1M
04	**THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON** 2008	$335.8M
05	**HIDDEN FIGURES** 2016	$236M
06	**PAW PATROL: THE MIGHTY MOVIE** 2023	$195.6M
07	**DATE NIGHT** 2010	$152.3M
08	**THINK LIKE A MAN** 2012	$96.1M
09	**FOUR BROTHERS** 2005	$92.4M
10	**LARRY CROWNE** 2011	$75.1M

ON LOCATION REEL SPOTS BEHIND THE CAMERA

WHAT? *Heart of Stone*'s Agent Stone (Gal Gadot) is at a glitzy ski hotel and travels to the bottom of the mountain via parachute and snow bike to circumnavigate an arms dealer.

WHERE? Glacier Hotel Grawand, Alpin Arena Senales Ski Resort, Val Senales, Italy.

GO? The Grawand provides stunning views at 3,212 metres above sea level. Recommended to take their cable car to the valley bottom rather than slide it, though.

20TH CENTURY STUDIOS, SONY

Want us to investigate if a movie scenario is bollocks or snapped yourself at a film location? Contact us at totalfilm@futurenet.com

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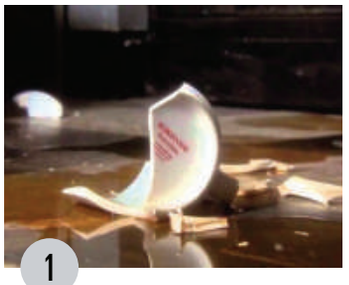
MUGS ON SCREEN

Corking cuppas



1 THE USUAL SUSPECTS

As Special Agent Kujan (Chazz Palminteri) sips his coffee and basks in the glow of a job well done, he slowly realises the identity of mythical mob boss Keyser Söze in the climatic moments of Bryan Singer's thriller, his Kobayashi mug slipping from his hand.

2 THE OFFICE (AMERICAN)

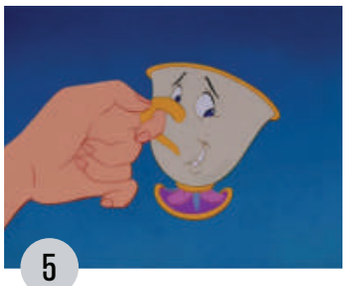
Regional manager of Dunder Mifflin's Scranton branch, Michael Scott (Steve Carell) knows what it takes to be the 'world's best boss': at least that's what his mug says. 'I think that pretty much sums it up,' he says in the show's pilot: 'I found it at Spencer Gifts.'

3 FRIENDS

Set around Central Perk, the titular chums have more mugs of coffee than most. But when Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow) breaks up with a psychiatrist beau, he offers his Freudian analysis about their 'stupid big cups which, I'm sorry, might as well have nipples on them'.

4 STRANGER THINGS

He might be a chain-smoking bundle of trauma, but Chief Jim Hopper (David Harbour) still knows the importance of starting the day off right. 'Flo, we've discussed this,' he says, clutching his favourite mug. 'Mornings are for coffee and contemplation.'



5 BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

When the Beast's castle comes under a curse, all his servants are transformed, too, in Disney's classic fairy tale, including Mrs Potts (Angela Lansbury) and her son Chip (Bradley Pierce), the latter becoming a living mug that gives heroine Belle literal service with a smile.

6 KNIVES OUT

Following the murder of patriarch Harlan (Christopher Plummer) – and subsequent police investigation – the Thrombey family look up at nurse Marta (Ana de Armas) on their balcony, sipping from a mug emblazoned with the prophetic words, 'My house, my rules.'

7 TWIN PEAKS

Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) is investigating the murder of Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), though he still has time to head to the diner for breakfast in David Lynch's mind-bending mystery. Sure, the mug might be plain, but it's still 'a damn fine cup of coffee'.

8 THOR

The God of Thunder may be more used to swigging beer, but when he's banished to Earth by father Odin (Anthony Hopkins), Thor (Chris Hemsworth) gets his first taste of coffee. 'This drink, I like it!' he shouts, smashing the mug in approval. 'Another!'

9 PULP FICTION

After accidentally shooting Marvin, hitmen Vince (John Travolta) and Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) head to Jimmie's (Quentin Tarantino) house. And though they're covered in brains, there's still time to drink some 'serious gourmet shit' out of Jimmie's brightly coloured mugs.

10 JAWS

Not a mug per se, but few moments sum up the difference between Quint (Robert Shaw) and Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss) as the way they finish their drinks: the captain chugging a beer before crushing his can, while the city boy copies with his own plastic cup. TIM COLEMAN

ABC. COLUMBIA TRISTAR. DISNEY. LIONSGATE. MARVEL STUDIOS. MIRAMAX. NBC. NETFLIX. UNIVERSAL. WARNER BROS.

Did we miss something? Let us know on @totalfilm

REEL ESTATE

FOR SALE Stunning red-brick Boston mansion with fairy-tale spire and highly desirable literary history – this was the former home of iconic author Harlan Thrombey. Current owner wishes to sell as property too spacious for one. Would suit a large, back-stabbing family with ample grounds for high jinks and writer's garret for wannabe *New York Times* bestseller. Numerous elegantly appointed rooms for family gatherings and visiting detectives. A perfect property to flip – new owners would make a killing. Please call Marta for a viewing (you'll know if she tries being untruthful).

HINDSIGHT CORNER

AARDMAN ANIMATIONS

CHICKEN RUN: DAWN OF THE NUGGET

The Daily Telegraph, November 2023

'Aardman is about to run out of clay – now the *Chicken Run* creators face a crisis.'

Aardman, November 2023

'We wanted to reassure fans that there is absolutely no need to worry. We have high levels of existing stocks of modelling clay to service current and future productions.'

FLOP CULTURE

THE MARVELS

The MCU has suffered its first outright flop. Was Nia DaCosta's team movie too minor to weather broader industry crises?

Why it was a good idea (on paper)

Watching *Avengers: Endgame*'s women-united moment, director Nia DaCosta had a dream. 'Two hours of this, please,' she said. Duly, DaCosta promised top-grade MCU bonding, battling and bantering from the power team of *WandaVision*'s Teyonah Parris, *Ms. Marvel*'s Iman Vellani and box-office star Brie Larson.

What went wrong?

First up: the 'go woke go broke' line doesn't wash. When *Captain Marvel* crashed the $1bn club, its positioning between *Infinity War*/*Endgame* wasn't the sole reason – *Ant-Man and the Wasp* enjoyed a similar slot and netted half-ish of Cap's payday. More persuasively, *The Marvels*' worrying weekend reports can be attributed to cumulative problems, a meeting of inner shortcomings with gathering storms of external crises. The movie itself is a quick, quippy minor Marvel, the villain sketchy and plotting skittish. Post-*Endgame*/*No Way Home*/*Guardians 3*, such an early-MCU throwback feels borderline inconsequential and plays like something that's already – and surely soon will be – on Disney+. Arguably, the streamer has made Disney a victim of its success: the studio's branding is so all-consuming that everyone knows *The Marvels* will dock there shortly. That loose phrase 'superhero fatigue' sticks, too, with DC's recent flops also soiling the overstuffed genre's rep. Strike-diminished promo and other, well-reported, MCU jitters surely didn't help matters. Mostly, though, *The Marvels* feels like a tipping-point case for the fortunes of superheroes and streaming, its perhaps predictable failure illuminating wider studio and genre issues.

Redeeming feature

Cats, firstly. Otherwise, the power-swap scrap, cosmic score and Vellani's giddy lead keep things brisk and bright.

What happened next?

Subject to ongoing flux. So far, *Captain America: Brave New World* and *Thunderbolts* have moved to 2025, with production delays cited as the reason for a sparse 2024. Vellani fielded interviews like a pro, while Stephen King tweeted in admirable support.

Should it be remade?

No, cat's your lot for this one. Like Elaine Paige in *Memory*, Marvel needs to face a new day and move on. **KEVIN HARLEY**

BUDGET	BOX OFFICE	AWARDS	*TF* STAR RATING	ROTTEN TOMATOES
$274.8m	$197.7m	0	★★☆☆☆	61%

DISNEY/MARVEL, LIONSGATE, NETFLIX

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'Dan!..... Dan!..... ..... Daaaaaaan!'

IS IT JUST ME OR IS ALAN PARTRIDGE THE BEST COMEDY CHARACTER EVER?

MATT MAYTUM
@MATTMAYTUM

My appreciation of broadcaster, Norwich resident and Bond enthusiast Alan Partridge began in 1997, with *I'm Alan Partridge* S1 (the greatest six-episode Britcom run ever?). After that, I devoured vignettes from *The Day Today* and *On the Hour* and talk show *Knowing Me, Knowing You*.

I was hooked by the sheer quotability of the dialogue: 'Back of the net!' 'Cashback!' '*Jurassic Park*!' But it went beyond one-liners – the hair-splitting nerdiness, the unwarranted arrogance and the air of desperation made for a complete comedy character, rather than just a stockpile of catchphrases.

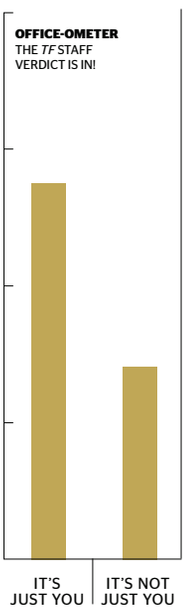
Of course, the character succeeds in large part due to Steve Coogan's superb, decades-long comedic performance. But, there is also much credit owed to Neil and Rob Gibbons, who have written for every Partridge project since 2010's *Mid Morning Matters*. Originally created as sponsored content, these short skits had no right being as funny as they were. Partridge's indefatigable longevity was cemented with 2011 autobiography *I, Partridge: We Need to Talk About Alan*.

Here was a character whose comedic capacity could be unlocked in so many contexts, from faux radio broadcasts to faux chat shows to faux documentaries. And that's before you factor in books, memoirs, travelogues... He even works on film (though *Alpha Papa* is my least favourite Partridge project).

Now that the character is so fully established, you can drop him into any medium. Podcasts, further books, a live stage event (*Stratagem*) and more show him to be as funny as he ever was. Recent TV series *This Time...* was among his finest output.

The King's coronation showed that Alan can blunder into any event with his own unique commentary. On social media, 'Accidental Partridge' brightens my feed, capturing real people stumbling into Partridgean faux pas. And I can't hear about a terrible-sounding reality show without picturing Norfolk's finest reclining on a Travel Tavern bed, speaking into his Dictaphone. Alan Partridge has been hilarious for more than 30 years, and he should continue to be commissioned for decades to come. Or is it just me?

Share your reaction at gamesradar.com/totalfilm or on Facebook and Twitter/X.



LAST TIME SHOULD HORROR DITCH CLOWNS?

GARETH EVANS
We got clowns running the country, so why not let them be in movies?!?

STE
The zombie obsession is what's boring.

JONI BLANCHARD
People are scared of clowns. Should they not make ghost films either?

UMBERTO PISCINA
Ghosts, vampires, monsters, demons... all been done ad nauseum. Take them all out?

DAMIEN KIRKBY
I'd say the opposite: there aren't enough clowns in horror films for my liking.

BABY COW, WARNER BROS.

Celebrating the standout stock characters in movies...

TAKING STOCK

DEAD PARENTS

WORDS **JOEL HARLEY**

Darkness! No parents! The orphan is a storytelling fixture extending back to fairy-tale lore and early literature. Those dead parents ground their children in a recognisable moment of trauma, latching onto a universal tragedy that touches us all in some way. This gives the heroic orphan plenty of unresolved issues to unpack, stranded in a world ripe for exploration, adventure and horror – no safety net, no boundaries. While no superhero would be complete without a dead parental figure (in Spider-Man's case, a multiverse full of them), Disney has become a wholesale parent-killing factory, ever since the Evil Queen took her fair stepdaughter under her cape in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Meanwhile, modern orphans Harry Potter and the Baudelaire children keep the tradition going long after the Victorian orphanages have closed. Join *Buff* as it mourns the mums and dads who died to keep their children motivated and sad.

JEFFREY DEAN MORGAN AND LAUREN COHAN

BATMAN V SUPERMAN: DAWN OF JUSTICE (2016)

Of all dead parents in all of pop culture, none have been deader than Thomas and Martha Wayne. Their traumatic exit from son Bruce's life left such a gaping hole that he grew up to become a fancy-dressing justice-dispenser (played in this case by Ben Affleck), smashing Gotham's villains in the face and feuding with the man of steel (Henry Cavill). Most film versions of the Batman have shown the Waynes' murder in some fashion, and Zack Snyder did so during the opening credits. From Thomas Wayne's impressive moustache to Martha's pearl necklace, Snyder gave live-action cinema its most faithful recreation of the historic moment to date. However, what viewers are more likely to remember is the now-infamous 'Why did you say that name?' line.

TAKING STOCK

BAMBI'S MUM
PAULA WINSLOWE, BAMBI (1942)

Disney garnered a reputation for killing the parents with their fifth major release, traumatising generations to come with one fateful gunshot. The studio's most notable dead mum is killed off early in the film, shot by an unseen hunter known only as 'Man'. This is the inciting event for the young prince's coming-of-age story, preceding *The Lion King* and the death of Mufasa by more than 50 years. The body was meant to be shown in the aftermath, but this was later removed, out of fear that it would be too dark. Bambi's mother lived on with cameos in other animated Disney movies, including *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Sword in the Stone* and *The Jungle Book*… this time being stalked by Shere Khan. She just can't catch a break.

TED ARROWAY
DAVID MORSE, CONTACT (1997)

Dr. Ellie Arroway (Jodie Foster – with Jena Malone as 'young Ellie') is introduced to a lifelong love of science by her father, Ted, who dies of a heart attack during her childhood. Ellie grows up to make the old man proud, following his passion for space into a career in radio astrology. Discovering a series of signals emanating from the stars, Ellie finds definitive proof that intelligent life is out there. Deeming humanity worthy of conversation, the aliens get in touch – choosing Ellie's father as a comforting physical manifestation, and allowing her to give Dad one last hug. Director Robert Zemeckis had planned on stopping time to show Ted's fatal heart attack in slow-motion, but settled on the powerful mirror reflection sequence – removing Ted to hone in on Ellie's horror.

LILY AND JAMES POTTER
GERALDINE SOMERVILLE AND ADRIAN RAWLINS, HARRY POTTER (2001-2011)

Harry Potter (Daniel Radcliffe) never got the opportunity to know his parents. Lily and James died when he was an infant, which in turn led to him being brought up (if you can call it that) by his vile aunt Petunia (Fiona Shaw) and her husband Vernon (Richard Griffiths). The young wizard learned of his magical heritage once Hogwarts came calling, and with it, the revelation that his mum and dad were killed trying to protect him from He Who Must Not Be Named (alright, it was Voldemort). His folks did pop up in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, when Harry got to see their faces thanks to the properties of a magic mirror. Said mirror failed to mention that his dad was a bit of a bully, hence Severus Snape's visible disdain for Lily and James' offspring.

HOWARD STARK
DOMINIC COOPER, JOHN SLATTERY, THE MCU (2008-PRESENT)

Much of the rivalry between Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) and Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) came down to a simple case of jealousy and daddy issues. 'You two knew each other? He never mentioned that. Maybe a thousand times. God, I hated you,' Tony told his star-spangled frenemy in *Civil War*. The antagonism only intensified when he learned that Steve's best pal, Bucky, was responsible for his parents' murder. John Slattery took over from Dominic Cooper to play the aged-up version of the character, finally giving Tony some resolution in *Avengers: Endgame*. 'We don't look anything alike at all. There's a certain energy about him, a style of what he's portraying… which maybe we have an essence of in common,' Cooper said, on sharing the role.

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APOLLO CREED

CARL WEATHERS, CREED (2016-2023)

Legendary athlete Apollo Creed has been dead ever since taking a fatal beating from Ivan Drago (Dolph Lundgren) in 1985's *Rocky IV*. Yet the big man's shadow looms over his love child, Adonis (Michael B. Jordan), in 2016's *Creed*. Brought up in an orphanage and later adopted by Apollo's widow (Phylicia Rashad), Adonis is reluctant to ride his dad's coattails to the big time – a battle with his father's legacy that proves tougher than any boxing match. In the ultimate nepo baby fight, 2018's *Creed II* gave Donnie closure as he faced down the Dragos. Thankfully, fans were spared the return of Apollo Creed, force ghost. 'In the original first draft, it was Apollo came back. Or his ghost or something. It was a little hokey, you know,' Lundgren revealed.

PHILIPPE RENALDI

RENÉ AUBERJONOIS, THE PRINCESS DIARIES (2001)

In the book series upon which director Garry Marshall's coming-of-age comedy is based, Mia Thermopolis's (Anne Hathaway) father is alive and well, and of great importance to the story. Yet, for this adaptation, his death is the inciting moment which causes Mia to learn of her royal heritage. Having lined up Dame Julie Andrews to play Mia's grandmother Clarisse, producers wanted to cut dad Philippe and give the Queen his juiciest lines. Upon learning of Andrews' mooted involvement, author Meg Cabot had no problem with killing off dad. 'I was like, "Kill the dad, sure,"' she laughed in an interview. The late René Auberjonois voiced the king in a letter to his daughter, although the picture on Mia's desk is of Hathaway's own dad, Gerald.

DONNA SHERIDAN

MERYL STREEP, LILY JAMES, MAMMA MIA! HERE WE GO AGAIN (2018)

Star Meryl Streep reprised her role as Donna Sheridan for this follow-up to the hit musical, except now her character was dead, having passed away between films. Director Ol Parker used the matriarch's absence to explore Donna's youth as a rebellious young firebrand, with Lily James playing the younger version of the character. However, in re-opening Donna's diaries, Parker realised that mum would have to die for maximum impact. 'I think it's the most meaningful and impactful way to tell that story,' the director mused. Although the cause of Donna's death isn't disclosed, she didn't go quickly. 'It wasn't sudden, it wasn't a drowning or something. So, something slow,' Parker later revealed. Whether the family were singing ABBA on mum's deathbed is also not known.

ALAMY. DISNEY/MARVEL STUDIOS. WARNER BROS.

LEAVE THE MUNDANITY OF THE MAINSTREAM BEHIND

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INTERMISSION

A WRITER TAKES PAUSE TO CONSIDER....

How watching films helped him to grieve for his friend.

JAMIE GRAHAM
@JAMIE_GRAHAM9

Are we gonna jump or jerk off?'

This was the last text message I received from Gary, one of my best friends since I was 12. It was sent at 11.57pm on Friday 29 September 2023, and a week later I got a phone call telling me that he'd died of a heart attack. He was 50.

'Are we gonna jump or jerk off?' No more. Just those words. I'd replied with, 'Broken-glass reflections, show your flesh eaten away.' No more. Just those words.

It's something we'd done since we'd first got mobile phones in the late 90s – sending each other quotes from our favourite movies and music. Sometimes we'd then move on to a general catch-up, sometimes a phone call. But often that was it. Nothing else was needed. Just a few familiar words by way of reaching out and stirring up cherished memories of our shared youth.

I awakened on Saturday 30 September to that particular message and grinned as I pictured us sitting in Gary's living room watching Keanu Reeves' Johnny Utah prepare to fling himself out of a plane in *Point Break*. No doubt Gary – or Garfield, as we always called him – similarly grinned when he received my reply. He probably thought of us cruising our small town in his black Corsa, smoking cigarettes with the windows down and Slayer blaring.

Garfield, like myself, like many teenagers, was obsessive about his passions. When he was into a band, they soundtracked his life. And when he loved a movie, he watched it on loop until he could quote it verbatim. His favourite films included *Highlander*, *Cape Fear*, *Stand by Me*, *The Lost Boys*, *Once Were Warriors*, *This Is Spinal Tap* and *The Green Mile*, and countless times over the years I awoke to messages such as 'Hello, pretty', 'Counsellor… could you be there?' and 'How are those maggots?' When I got that phone call telling me of his sudden passing, I couldn't believe that I'd never again receive a quote. There are far bigger considerations – Gary's partner and children, for starters – but that was the thing that weirdly stuck. And I still can't believe it, five turbulent weeks later.

'In the week leading up to the funeral, I rewatched his favourite films. I watched them through his eyes'

In the week leading up to the funeral, at which my body rose to its feet and walked to the podium in slow motion to deliver the tribute in an underwater voice, I rewatched Garfield's favourite films. I watched them through his eyes, knowing his favourite bits, and it was both a deeply saddening and gladdening experience. I could feel his presence but also an unfillable void. When my dad died 22 years ago, I pushed the pain down, down, down as far as it would go, and refused to peek at it, *ever*. With Gary, I was determined to invite it in and process it. How that works out we'll see down the line, though right now I still check my phone expecting a quote. I can't compute that the person who was my 'ride or die' in my teens and 20s, and who I still thought of every single day despite us not meeting up in the last 10 years, is gone.

The loss sent me spinning to *Stand by Me*. When Gary and I first viewed it together, aged 14, we became obsessed, watching it over and over. Well, I watched it again before the funeral, and the ending hit harder than ever – Chris Chambers fading away as Gordie's voiceover tells of his BFF's premature death and says, 'Although I hadn't seen him in more than a decade, I know I'll miss him forever.' Cut to the final lines of Gordie's novella on the word processor: 'I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was 12. Jesus, does anyone?'

ALAMY

GOLDEN GRAHAMS

Editor-at-Large Jamie Graham unearths underrated classics...

THIS MONTH

Murder by Contract and *Blast of Silence*

I write this at the end of November, or Noirvember as it was for me, as I watched a film noir every day of the month, mostly from the classic period (1941–1958). Some were rewatches of recognised masterpieces: *The Maltese Falcon*, *Laura*, *Double Indemnity*, *Detour*, *The Big Sleep*, *Out of the Past*, *In a Lonely Place*, *Sunset Blvd.*, *The Big Heat*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Touch of Evil*, etc. But mainly I tried to seek out lesser-known entries, for the 40s and 50s – scarred by the Great Depression and World War Two – were stacked with these poetic, cynical, shadow-drenched crime thrillers, in which tough-talking guys and duplicitous dames mashed lips and murky morals.

In the dark, dark corners, I discovered several gems, such as Don Siegel's brutal *The Lineup*, Jacques Tourneur's slippery *Nightfall* and Phil Karlson's authentically gritty *The Phenix City Story*. But two stood out: Irving Lerner's *Murder by Contract* (1958) and Allen Baron's *Blast of Silence* (1961). Both, as it happens, are concerned with killers for hire. And both, I found out later, are revered by Martin Scorsese.

Murder by Contract sees smart, capable Claude (Vince Edwards) establish himself as an efficient assassin. With two brilliantly executed jobs under his belt, he's rewarded with a big assignment in LA – to terminate a witness who's about to testify against a mobster. The witness is under heavy FBI guard. Claude can deal with that. What he doesn't like is that the witness is a woman. Is there a patch of warmth in that chunk of ice where his heart should be? Nah, he just thinks dolls are 'unpredictable', liable to screw up his best-laid plans with their scatty behaviour.

Blast of Silence, meanwhile, has Cleveland killer Frank Bono (played by director Baron) sent to New York to cancel a second-string mob boss. Frank is painstakingly detailed, tracking his mark's movements. He's also callous and fucked-up. 'You were born into pain,' says the voiceover, which, unusually, is in the second person. 'You were born with hate and anger built in.' Nothing can stop Frank, or put him off his game. Until, that is, he fatefully bumps into a woman from his distant past…

Blast of Silence's unvarnished narration, tortured philosophising and warped mindset surely guided Paul Schrader and Scorsese when they made *Taxi Driver*. Likewise, Marty adores *Murder by Contract*, saying, 'It's the film that influenced me the most.' He praises its 'economy of style', and it was shot in just seven days, with the camera placement and framing screaming detachment and moral emptiness.

Blast of Silence packs more into its frames but it's cluttered filth, the detritus on display reflecting a psychology that is sullied and ugly. Baron shot in New York without a permit for 22 days over a four-month period, putting friends and family in background roles, and filming the climax during a real-life hurricane to add production value. The scene takes place in a location that was said to be a real-life dumping ground for mob hits.

Both of these gloriously savage movies were years ahead of their time, offering tours around a killer's mind with no safety rails to cling to. So next time you see a list of the greatest noirs and it comprises all the usual suspects, remember these. They're number one with a bullet.

JAMIE WILL RETURN NEXT ISSUE...
FOR MORE RECOMMENDATIONS, FOLLOW @JAMIE_GRAHAM9 ON TWITTER/X

See these if you liked...

POINT BLANK 1967
Double-crossed and left for dead, Lee Marvin's Walker implacably treads the road to revenge.

TAXI DRIVER 1976
The influences are clear: Travis Bickle's twisted mind, Scorsese's use of found locations, and fever-dream waves of expressionistic flourishes...

COLLATERAL 2004
Tom Cruise excels as assassin Vincent, cruising the mean streets of LA in Michael Mann's stylish neo-noir.

THE KILLER 2023
Fincher's controlled study of a contract killer owes a huge debt to *Murder by Contract* and *Blast of Silence*.

ONE MORE...

CRY OF THE CITY 1948
Robert Siodmak's NYC noir about friends on the opposite side of the law is another Scorsese fave.

ALAMY

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THE MOTION PICTURE ASSOCIATION

The rating game...

CENSORSHIP

Sponsored by the studios themselves, the Motion Picture Association (MPA) is effectively the US movie industry's moral guardian. Originally known as the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), it was founded in 1922, under the leadership of former postmaster general William H. Hays, in response to a series of bad-for-business Tinseltown scandals. Hays produced a series of rules, known colloquially as the Hays Code, severely restricting what could be shown on screen.

VIOLENCE

Distributors are keen to avoid the NC-17 (frequently dubbed 'the kiss of death') as it restricts where movies can be shown and therefore their profits. But a few prestige studio pictures have been shown leniency, which some consider a double standard. Mel Gibson's 2004 bloodbath *The Passion of the Christ*, which critic Roger Ebert described as 'the most violent movie I have seen', was given an R rating, which meant children (accompanied by an adult) could see it. It made $612m worldwide.

CERTIFICATION

By the mid-1960s, the Hays Code was hopelessly out of date. To replace it, former political advisor Jack Valenti, who became MPA president in 1966, brought in a voluntary age-rating system that remains more or less intact in the 21st century. Established in 1968, the ratings (determined by an independent group of parents) run from G (suitable for general audiences, such as the Toy Storys) to NC-17 (no one under 17 admitted, e.g. *Blonde*). Today, the MPA rates around 600 films a year.

CONTROVERSY

Battling the MPA has become a point of principle for smaller films such as 1986's *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, denied an R rating and finally released, unrated, in 1990. The association's apparent dislike of swearing led to family favourite *Billy Elliot* being awarded an R (the same as *Pulp Fiction*!). Still, appeals can be used to overturn harsh decisions, such as when 2010's *Blue Valentine* was downgraded from NC-17 to R.

MATT GLASBY

SEX

Featuring Robert De Niro in his first lead, Brian De Palma's *Greetings* (1968) was the first US film to receive an X, a rating intended for films that were non-pornographic but clearly unsuitable for children. It was co-opted by the porn industry as a badge of notoriety, and replaced in 1990 by the NC-17; *Henry & June* was the first film to receive the new certificate. Critics of the MPA say it is more hung up on sexual content – particularly of the non-hetero variety – than it is violence.

KEY MOVIES

INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM 1984

★★★★☆

Its torn-out hearts and child peril were deemed so violent, Spielberg's prequel helped usher in the PG-13 rating.

SHOWGIRLS 1995

★★★☆☆

Paul Verhoeven's glossy grot-fest became the most widely distributed NC-17 film ever, shown in nearly 1,400 cinemas.

EYES WIDE SHUT 1999

★★★★★

In order to receive an R rating, Stanley Kubrick's erotic drama had several sex scenes digitally altered after his death.

THE KING'S SPEECH 2010

★★★★☆

Tom Hooper's Oscar-winning historical drama was given an R for a single sweary scene. The MPA rejected the appeal.

20TH CENTURY STUDIOS, DISNEY ICON, MGM/UA, NETFLIX, UNIVERSAL, WARNER BROS., WEST ENDS FILMS

WHICH SPORTING UNDERDOG(S) ARE YOU?

ARE YOU AN ITALIAN STALLION OR A GENUINE GEE-GEE? DO YOU RELY ON STATS OR BUNNIES AND PUDDY TATS?

START

ARE YOU THE STOCK ANSWER TO 'NAME A SPORTING UNDERDOG?'

YES

YOU ARE ROCKY BALBOA

NO

DOES YOUR SPORT INVOLVE BALLS?

YES

FROZEN ONES?

YES

YOU ARE THE JAMAICAN BOBSLED TEAM
COOL RUNNINGS

NO

IS YOUR STORY A TRUE ONE?

YES

LIKE TRUE-TRUE?

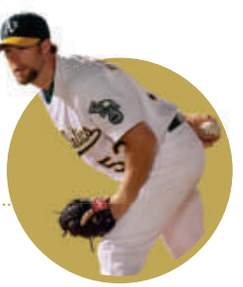
YES

YOUR SECRET WEAPON: STATISTICS OR SLAPSTICK?

STATISTICS

YOU ARE THE AVERAGE JOE'S TEAM
DODGEBALL: A TRUE UNDERDOG STORY

NO



YOU ARE OAKLAND ATHLETICS
MONEYBALL

SLAPSTICK

YOU ARE AMERICAN SAMOA
NEXT GOAL WINS

NO

ARE YOU 'ANIMALS' OR ACTUAL CRITTERS IN SINGLETS?

'ANIMALS'

YOU ARE THE BAD NEWS BEARS

WHAT'S UP, DOC?

YOU ARE THE TUNE SQUAD
SPACE JAM

NO

ARE YOU ROCKY WITH FETLOCKS, NO SOCKS OR BITS OF OTHER BOTS?

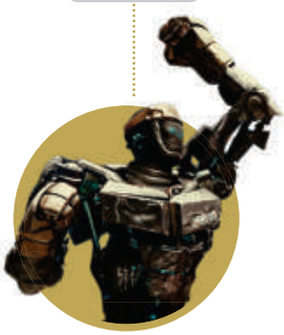
FETLOCKS

YOU ARE SEABISCUIT

NO SOCKS

YOU ARE THE KARATE KID

BOT BITS

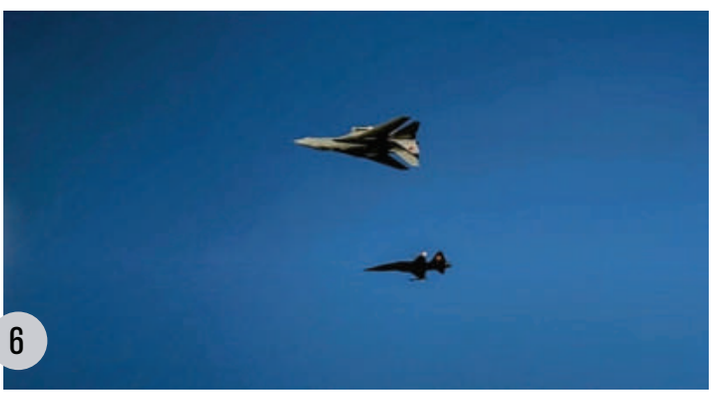


YOU ARE ATOM
REAL STEEL

ALAMY, DISNEY, MGM, PARAMOUNT, SEARCHLIGHT, SONY, WARNER BROS.

NAME THE FRAME

Can you guess these eight aviation scenes?



ANSWERS: 1. *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* 2. *THE AVIATOR* 3. *DUNKIRK* 4. *AIR FORCE ONE* 5. *THE DAM BUSTERS* 6. *TOP GUN* 7. *AIR AMERICA* 8. *MEMPHIS BELLE*

Dialogue

Mail, rants, theories etc.

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★ STAR LETTER

After watching *Drive My Car* and *The Transporter* in the same week (not by design), I was struck by their superficial similarity and had fun imagining Jason Statham's Frank Martin replacing Tôko Miura's Misaki Watari and vice versa. Can you imagine Frank listening to *Uncle Vanya* and ferrying the 'package' – theatre director Yûsuke Kafuku – between home and rehearsals? Can readers think of any other daft swaps where action stars are inserted into arthouse gems because of their jobs? What would happen if Steven Seagal's *Under Siege* chef turned up in *Eat Drink Man Woman*?

ALAN EDWARD ROBERTS, VIA EMAIL

Can we go with The Stath turning up unexpectedly, in a sort of new, fighty version of Rickrolling? Imagine *2001*'s cosmic foetus replaced by our Jase kickboxing hapless satellites. Or steaming into *The Seventh Seal* to snatch the chessboard and use it as a lethal discus? 'Checkmate, ya tosser!' The possibilities are endless (and alarming). Alan and everyone with a letter printed here will receive a copy of *Saw X*, out now on 4K UHD, Blu-ray, DVD and digital via Lionsgate UK. Didn't send an address? Email it! Or there'll be no Bell prize!

TRUE BELIEVER

I finally got round to seeing the new Exorcist film, *The Exorcist: Believer*. I thought the movie was really slow to begin with; it took a while before anything creepy happened. But I did think the storyline was excellent, definitely as good as the original's. I strongly encourage others to go and watch the film.

SUSAN CAWTE, ILFORD

'Let's get this sorted pronto – I've got a pick-up in Tokyo after this and don't want to lose my Uber rating...'

@_JOH_N

[What would you want from a fifth Thor movie?]

'Them to call it *Thor + One*'

You might want to brace yourself before turning the page, Susan; the power of mischief compelled us to give the movie the *60 Second Screenplay* treatment. You'll be pleased to know, though, that a sequel is on the cards for next year, which hopefully will offer Linda Blair an expanded role (and not in the sense of turning her into a giant ice-cream, a la 1990 spoof *Repossessed*).

TAKING A POP

As a lover of movies I am starting to get really annoyed about so many music stars getting roles in feature films. Why can't these roles go to actors who need the work, rather than to someone just because they have a fan base? Grrrr!

CARL HOWARD, LOWESTOFT

So we take it you're not backing LadBaby to be the next James Bond? True, it does strike a bum note with music-turned-movie stars when it's a case of blatant stunt casting. On the other hand, if Ed Sheeran gave up his cameos then half of all Hollywood movies would be left with awkward 30-second gaps to fill.

WICK NOTE

I take complete umbrage with the claim in issue 337's *Dialogue* that *John Wick: Chapter 4* is the best fourquel ever made. I can't think of a less valid notion. That movie was an atrocious display of overblown and underwritten excess. And everybody knows that the best fourquel ever made is *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter*.

SUE FINN, WERRIBEE

WHAT YOU MISSED ON THE POD LAST MONTH

Chats with (deep breath) Timothée Chalamet, Greta Gerwig, Christopher Nolan, Natalie Portman, Zack Snyder, Taika Waititi and more (exhale)! Christmas Grinchiness! Plus reviews and more, every week!

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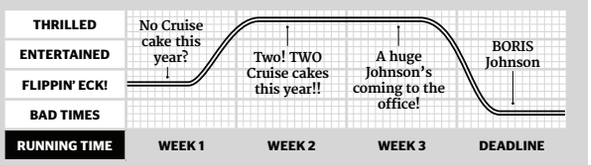

LIONSGATE. ALAN MILLER. 20TH CENTURY STUDIOS

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OFFICE SPACED

CHATTER 'GEMS' OVERHEARD IN THE *TOTAL FILM* OFFICE THIS MONTH...

*'I really hope one of the *Godzilla x Kong* beasts ends up wearing a pyramid as a hat' * **'Wish I'd lived in the Old West. All you needed was a horse and a harmonica'**

To paraphrase *This Is Spinal Tap* (see p93), what's wrong with being excess-y? Interesting shout re: *The Final Chapter* (even if we reckon Trading Standards need to retrospectively investigate that title – there have been about 27 more!). Horror does seem to fare better than other genres when it comes to fourquels. By which we mean we'd take *Bride of Chucky* (see p89) or *Scream 4* on an infinite loop over two minutes of *Batman & Robin*.

PREMIERE WIN

Now *this* is a ticket stub, from *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*'s UK premiere in August 1982. My note at the top reads, '2,000 cynics become 2,000 eight-year-olds!' (Actually it was 3,000 in the Edinburgh Playhouse that night, as later confirmed by the BBC.) At two moments the majority of the audience stood up to applaud, and the cheers afterwards went on for ages. There was a sign on the Playhouse noticeboard afterwards – 'E.T., phone home' – which, believe me, was actually funny the first time you saw that reference. The previous Sunday I saw *Blade Runner* – what a summer that was!

ALAN MILLER, VIA EMAIL

FACEBOOK

SHANE O'CONNOR

[on the Furiosa trailer]

'I've never known the outback to be so crowded!'

Indeed – take that, Barbenheimer. How cool to have had your own personal cultural phenom, which we'll dub, um... Blade Blubber? BMX-us 6? E.T. the Extra-Te-Rick-strial? OK, that's just Dick-ing around now. Can anyone compete with Alan's spectacular Spielberg/Scott sci-fi double bill?

GREAT BEYOND

I think it's a shame that very few people will see *Beyond Utopia*, the heartbreaking documentary about the marvellous work of Seungeun Kim (founder of the Caleb Mission), who assists persecuted individuals in fleeing North Korea. This is in spite of the fact that he risks being killed for advising refugees and has already suffered a broken neck while helping others escape. If only a top Hollywood studio would adapt this story to gain worldwide attention.

STEPHEN MCCARTHY, GLASGOW

We'd be slightly nervous that an adap would do the subject matter the same justice as the doc, but hard agree on the need to raise awareness of the movie. Hopefully *Beyond Utopia* will be a big part of the awards-season conversation. (Is it that time already? Can we have a pre-emptive moan about Easter eggs already being on the shelf, in case we forget to do it next month?)

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TOTAL FILM

SPOILER ALERT!

60 SECOND SCREENPLAY

TF SAVES YOU THE COST OF A MOVIE EVERY MONTH. THIS ISSUE: THE EXORCIST: BELIEVER...

WORDS MATT LOOKER

FADE IN:

INT. HOTEL, HAITI

Immediately after receiving a protective blessing from strangers, LESLIE ODOM JR.'s pregnant wife is crushed in an earthquake.

PARAMEDIC

Due to improbable medical reasons, I can only save your wife or the baby. You have to choose.

LESLIE ODOM JR.

Could you... maybe take her to the hospital first to be sure?

INT: HOME, GEORGIA – 13 YEARS LATER

A very protective LESLIE ODOM JR. lets his daughter LIDYA JEWETT go to her friend OLIVIA O'NEILL's house after school because it seems perfectly safe. They go missing. LESLIE teams up with OLIVIA's mum JENNIFER NETTLES.

JENNIFER NETTLES

I've phoned around and they were last seen walking into the woods together.

LESLIE ODOM JR.

OK, let's search there. They probably just got lost or fell asleep after performing a ritual séance or something. Everything will be OK.

They find a shoe, a bag and a snake. The local police launch a full manhunt that continues for three days, but feels much longer.

LESLIE ODOM JR.

It's been ages. I can't imagine we'll have any luck finding them now.

The girls are found in a farmhouse just down the road a bit.

INT: HOSPITAL

DOCTOR

The girls think they've only been gone for a few hours. Plus they're behaving supernaturally creepy. It's probably trauma.

LESLIE ODOM JR.

OK, great! Let me take my daughter home against all medical advice then.

LIDYA JEWETT gets home, sheds her fingernails, attacks LESLIE ODOM JR. and has a seizure. He takes her straight back to the hospital. Meanwhile, OLIVIA O'NEILL goes to church.

OLIVIA O'NEILL

Look, I've spilled wine everywhere and it looks a bit like blood! RAARGHH!

JENNIFER NETTLES

Wait, Jesus disappeared for three days after he died because he visited Hell. The girls were missing for the same time. It can't be a coincidence!

EXT: FRONT PORCH

LIDYA JEWETT upsets hospital nurse ANN DOWD, who then tells LESLIE ODOM JR. to watch 1973 classic *The Exorcist*. He does and then tracks down ELLEN BURSTYN CAMEO.

ELLEN BURSTYN CAMEO

It's true. My daughter was possessed and then I wrote a novelisation and now she refuses to speak to me. It prevented me from ever being in another Exorcist film again. Until now.

LESLIE ODOM JR.

Well, I could really do with your help. You're a classic character so you're guaranteed to be safe.

They visit OLIVIA O'NEILL and she immediately stabs ELLEN BURSTYN CAMEO's eyes out with a crucifix.

OLIVIA O'NEILL

Wasting an Oscar-winning actor's time with a needlessly gory scene? Well, I am evil.

INT: HOME

The parents, including OLIVIA's dad NORBERT LEO BUTZ, strap both girls to chairs and then invite a bunch of spiritual leaders from different cultures over for an exorcism party.

LIDYA JEWETT

At the start of the film, you chose to save your wife's life but she died anyway so you got me. So we'll make you choose again: which one of us will you save?

LESLIE ODOM JR.

What?! I couldn't possibly choose between-

NORBERT LEO BUTZ

Olivia!! Save my little girl. Kill the other one, I don't care.

LIDYA JEWETT dies, but then she gets over it and revives while OLIVIA O'NEILL is dragged into Hell. It was just a trick. The demon basically punk'd them.

NORBERT LEO BUTZ

I've certainly learned my lesson. I realise now that it was selfish of me to instinctively protect my daughter out of love and sheer terror.

INT: HOSPITAL

As the hospital nurse and the police detective discuss the nature of evil for some reason, ELLEN BURSTYN CAMEO receives a visit.

LINDA BLAIR CAMEO

I'm back, too! Perhaps we'll both actually be in the next film together properly??

ELLEN BURSTYN CAMEO

The power of box-office potential compels us!

FIN

NEXT ISSUE: THE HUNGER GAMES: THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS & SNAKES

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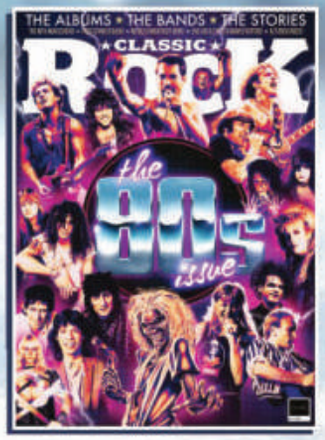

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